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Of a Linear Circle - Part VIII - The Second Wizarding War

by flamethrower

Summary

Voldemort's second British Wizarding War began on the Ides of March. Wizarding Britain is still reeling, but there is hardening resolve, as well.

Voldemort will be stopped. Dumbledore is not the only magician to make such a promise.

Notes

Nope, this story isn't dead. I'm just having trouble adjusting to...a lot, really. If you follow my Tumblr (deadcatwithaflamethrower), you're aware of most of it, but let's just say that stress is *not* conducive to lots of writing. O_o

I'll do my best, guys. I love this story, too. <3
Amelia Tyler wakes at 05:00, as is her habit. She’s sliding on her usual compression shorts for her morning run when last night’s date sits up and glares at her.

“It is dawn,” Sarah complains. “Are you mental?”

Amelia hopes she is recalling the woman’s name correctly. It is her job to remember every detail in a given situation. However, when she has time off, she truly does leave her job behind.

It had also been deafening inside the clubs on the West End last night. Hearing had been secondary to acquiring the right sort of partner.

Maybe it’s not Sarah, but Samantha. Shit.

“I always get up this early,” Amelia replies, tossing her cotton camisole nightshirt directly into the laundry basket. She isn’t one for delicate lingerie even if she has reason for it, and cotton is more forgiving of bloodstains. “There is food in the kitchen. Help yourself to breakfast, but try to be gone before I get back. I’ve work to do today.”

“But it’s Saturday!” Sarah-Samantha finally tosses the sheet aside, revealing that she is so devoted to the frill that she slept in the same lace garters, panties, and silken lace camisole she’d been happy to show off the evening before. “And I thought—”

Amelia winces as she yanks the compression top over her head and twists it into place to support her breasts. No, no, no. She does not need the complication of someone who didn’t realize this was a one-night stand! “Look. If I lead you on, I truly didn’t mean to do so. I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

Sarah-Samantha scowls at her for a long moment before heaving a sigh. “Fine. I was hoping for a bit more, but you didn’t once tell me otherwise. There had best be gourmet breakfast options in that kitchen, though!”

“There might be. My shopping is delivered, and the company knows I prefer items chosen at random.” It keeps her from establishing too many easily trackable patterns.

Sarah-Samantha—whatever the bloody hell her name is—pauses in the midst of buttoning a shimmering green shirt that is two sizes too small. Amelia will admit that fascination in how the ginger could possibly dance in that restrictive shirt had been part of last night’s appeal.

She had indeed been a grand dancer. She also had quite the talented tongue.

“You’re really going to leave me here on my lonesome, then.” Sarah-Samantha frowns. “You’re not worried I’ll rob you blind?”

Amelia lets out a gentle snort. “Darling, I work for the government. That would be a truly foolish thing to do.” She grabs her mobile phone, flat key, and ID card, and then pauses with her hand on the bedroom doorknob. “If there are scones lurking in my kitchen, save one for me, all right?”

“If there is fresh cream to go with those scones, you might not ever see your precious scones again,” Sarah-Samantha mutters.

Bugger. Amelia turns around and drops a chaste kiss onto the woman’s sulking forehead. “I did have
a lovely time, and quite enjoyed your company. Alas for us both, I am married to my job.”

“In that case, I will declare you a nutter and be grateful to have dodged a bullet.”

Amelia makes an appropriate face in response and leaves her flat. In the hall, she tucks her key into the secretive fold pocket, straps her phone to her wrist, and clips her ID card to the top of her shirt before tucking it beneath so it doesn’t bounce along and annoy her. Then she slips out into the blue-grey light of early morning to begin her run.

The route is never the same. Never give an enemy anything. Make them work for it.

Some days it’s the local park. Some days it’s the walkways. Some days it’s Tower Hamlets Cemetery, which is always peaceful when the sun begins to warm the old stones.

Today it’s a bit of a gymnastics run to distract herself. She climbs fences and crosses private rear residential gardens, evading bright lights or the notice of people who might object to her running across their fancy cast iron bench that is never sat upon.

She’s checked with careful little applications of white dust and black coal powder. The dust is always undisturbed. A bench that might cost a military driver a month’s wages is only out in the weather for show.

Amelia has gotten better at hiding it, even smiling in response, but she never finds jokes about dodging bullets to be funny. She was shot twice during Operation GRANBY in Iraq. The first time, it was the fault of a twat who couldn’t properly clear a corner. Instead of front-line Support, Amelia was suddenly acting as lead infantryman for a squad down to half its numbers.

They gave her the Queen’s Commendation for Valuable Service to thank her for getting the rest of her idiots back to base in one piece. Amelia rolled her eyes, gave the wound in her arm just enough time to heal, and went right back out into the desert. Still front-line, still only meant to be Support.

Still meaningless when their commanding officer put his foot down on a mine. When everyone froze in shock, and Thomas was too shocked to yet begin screaming, Amelia went to work and effectively took over the bloody squad. The medical officer stabilized Thomas, and two of their youngest infantry soldiers were assigned to carry him back to base for an airlift to Medical. Thomas would ultimately lose the whole of his left leg, but not his life.

The others wanted to go back for proper reassignment. Amelia knew they had to go forward. She was not supposed to be leading this operation, but it was an intelligence mission, and she was the only standing member of the Intelligence Corps they had available. The others were a bit preoccupied by Iraqi codes and burning oil wells, among other significant problems.

The infantry and other Support soldiers decided to follow Amelia’s lead. They found what they were looking for. Sent the information where it needed to go. Interrupted an ambush that might have saved them an entire regiment.

For Amelia, the rest of the Iraqi conflict ran along similar veins. She was the “pretty little Intelligence lass” who became known for fearlessness, icy rationale and reasoning while under fire, and minor fits of insubordination that would ultimately save lives, and was thus quietly brushed aside.

She was never fearless. Those who claimed to be fearless were often the first to run. She was terrified, all the time, and even more so when her tour finally ended and she was allowed to return to London.

London meant reporting to her commanding officer in MI-6 after a year-long stint in the field.
Instead of her report being delivered privately, Adams had company. Standing with her CO was a man in a clean and properly pressed uniform, one who seemed familiar. Before a briefing could even occur, he presented Amelia with her second commendation, the Distinguished Service Order.

Amelia was not inclined to speechlessness. She’d done nothing to earn that. Nothing!

She looked up and finally recognized the soldier as one of those she’d saved by holding the squad together the first time a mission soured on them. Adams informed her that her medal-dispensing soldier was a member of the royal family, and the reason she was in for a transfer and new assignment.

By the next morning, she was a high-ranking officer within the hierarchy of MI-5, all because one of the Lascelles decided he wanted Amelia Tyler to coordinate and lead the security team that protected his wife and children.

Domestic security wasn’t exactly what she’d signed up for, but the weather was nicer than Iraq. Off-duty, the husband and wife were…normal. Entirely too normal. It rubbed her the wrong way, but Amelia was too polite to say otherwise. Their children, however, were delightful, and though she could not spend much time with them when not on the job, they helped the long hours pass.

Amelia Tyler met Queen Elizabeth II while holding her young charge’s hand to escort her to the toilet. Her Majesty swept down and all but kidnapped Amelia’s charge, exclaiming that it had been far too long since they’ve seen one another. Amelia, bewildered and not certain what to do when the abductor of one of her charges was the bloody Queen, followed a few paces behind and tried to appear as if everything were entirely normal.

By 1995, she was a frequent visitor to the Frogmore House thanks to the Lascelles. Then she became permanent staff when the Lascelles went overseas; MI-6 was then on the clock for their safety, not MI-5.

By the first of 1996, the Queen had made it clear that she was fond of Amelia Tyler’s person, methods, and results. Amelia made it clear that she was fond of the position, herself.

In February, she met her first magicians. Amelia was praised for handling the situation perfectly, for all that she’d known magic was real (and that this was not an elaborate prank) for all of five fucking minutes.

The next day, the Queen named Amelia Tyler as the head of a brand new branch of MI-5, code-named Hadrian’s Wall. Amelia accepted the promotion with good grace, as was expected of her. Then she spent a good half-hour beneath her new desk to hyperventilate into a paper sack she found in the rubbish bin.

Afterwards, she got on with the business of trying to organize what would need to be a small, secretive, and ultimately quite powerful organization hidden within the bureaucracy of MI-5. She also ordered the Lord Black to get a damned telephone. Owls are interesting creatures for spreading the post, but they’re not exactly a common sight in an office building.

Sorting through hundreds upon hundreds of personnel files, searching for those minds with the right sort of flex to deal with magic and magicians and bloody owls gave her a week-long migraine. It was far easier to invite Sir Lupin to the building, line up a set of candidates, and have the man perform blatant magic in front of them.

The ones who asked intelligent questions made it to the second round. The rest went back to their current jobs within MI-5. That meant she needed something a bit more suitable than wand-waving to
narrow things down.

“Sirius can turn into a Newfoundland,” Sir Lupin pointed out. “That’s about as impressive as one can get without introducing your new underlings to a dragon.”

“Can we?” Amelia asked, wanting to bury her face in her hands. She’d read the histories that Her Majesty suggested. She’d witnessed the naming of the war mages. For her, it was beyond obvious that magic was real.

Why did MI-5 have to be staffed by so many stubborn realists who didn’t even believe in ghosts?

“Only when you’re ready to dispose of them,” Sir Lupin said, sipping at his tea. “I suppose he could bring his cousin, Nymphadora Tonks. She’s a Metamorphmagus, like Nizar, but she was born with the ability.”

“Two shapeshifters?” Amelia was intrigued; it might solve her difficulties, given that a magic-casting damned war mage was not enough for her candidates to fully give it a go on believing magic to be real.

“An Animagus, like Sirius—that’s mastery of the internal self, the mind. It’s hard to do, and it takes dedication to learn the magic. You have to be willing to confront who you are at the deepest level and not be frightened by what you see. A Metamorphmagus is a mastery of the external self. It requires a lot less navel-gazing, but Nizar says that it is far harder to learn. An Animagus is triggering an internal, automatic shift into a new form; a Metamorphmagus is relying on magic and memory to make a controlled change.”

“You sound like a school teacher,” Amelia commented, and regretted it when Sir Lupin flushed.

“Ahn. Yes. I was. For a year.” His smile was far too sad. “I did enjoy it, but there are too many parents who would fear a werewolf in the classroom.”

“You’re a war mage,” Amelia pointed out. She wasn’t certain of all the details yet in regards to Sir Lupin being an honest-to-God werewolf, but she had come to know the man in the weeks since their first meeting. He was pleasant, not terrible on the eyes in the slightest, intelligent, and sharp-witted when he chose, though he often waited to act until success was a certainty rather than a gamble.

When Amelia first met with Lord Black in her new office, she looked to his cousin and knew at once that she was in deep trouble. Magical Auror Nymphadora Tonks had magenta-colored hair, fiery brown eyes, a beautiful quirk of a nose, a brilliant smile, and spun a wand in her hand as quickly as she shifted her appearance to resemble a punk-dressed man. Then she was back to being a gorgeous woman in street punk gear, and off they went to scare the hell out of Amelia’s second-round recruits.

A human abruptly becoming a black Newfoundland dog and a magenta-haired girl who promptly mimicked the appearance of every potential employee in the room was quite the convincing argument. Amelia did take pity on those who promptly wet their trousers, and allowed them to depart discreetly in order to clean up. The NDAs they’d signed would keep them from speaking a word about magic to anyone. If they violate the terms MI-5 laid down, Amelia won’t be the one they will have to worry about.

Finally, Amelia had a team. They’re building an entirely new set of rules and policies to accommodate the many magicians of the United Kingdom, the war mages, and the private school of Hogwarts. She was coordinating with mundane and magical construction crews to build a modern magical prison that fit the standards of compassion in Britain. Tales of that medieval horror on its uncharted island off the British coast had chilled Amelia’s bones. The Queen was appalled and angry
that such a prison still existed, standing in direct violation of Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

She still can’t stop thinking about Sir Remus Lupin and Auror Nymphadora Tonks. Sarah-Samantha was a desperate effort in trying to distract herself from a war mage and a magical police officer.

It didn’t work very well. Sometimes being bi is a complete pain in the arse.

Amelia finishes her morning run and sits down on the last walled garden that lines the street. The family who normally resides here is vacationing in France, and the invading squirrels certainly won’t mind if she lingers. While catching her breath, Amelia watches as a few rays of sunlight pierce through London’s perpetual damp.

It’s Saturday, sixteenth March. She plans for it to be a quiet day working with her minions as they continue the political processes they’ve put into careful motion.

She can’t introduce Her Majesty to Wizarding Britain until Wizarding Britain has a Minister elected to welcome her, but that election is only a fortnight distant. It doesn’t leave them with much time to plan.

Amelia frowns. She doesn’t like walking into any situation blind. She wants to meet with the candidates for Minister for Magic, but doesn’t know if any of the three would agree to it. Some awareness of who the Queen will be discussing policy with once the election is confirmed would be useful, and it’s her job to have that information ready for Her Majesty before the Queen even thinks to ask.

Whether the new Minister for Magic will speak to Her Majesty in private or not is irrelevant. The war mages are keen on making certain that Wizarding Britain remembers they have a ruler on the throne they are supposed to acknowledge. Her Majesty is pleased to step out into the Wizarding public to deliver that reminder personally—whether the new Minister likes it or not.

Amelia is about to drop down from the wall and finish her run back to her flat when her mobile rings. She flips it open, glances at the number, and pinches the bridge of her nose before answering. “This is Tyler.”

“Madam Tyler, there has been an incident.”

She breathes in, slowly, feeling war-honed senses come to life. “What sort of incident, Johnson?”

“The Lord Deslizarse called it in about five minutes ago. Once we confirmed, we called you.”

Amelia scowls. “I’m well aware that you are capable of following basic protocol! What sort of incident, Johnson?”

“Oh. Er.” Her assistant’s voice squeaks a little before he answers. “That would be a Level 2, ma’am.”

“Thank God it’s not a Level 1,” Amelia says, and then her eyes widen. “Fuck a fried rubber duckie, Johnson.”

Wizarding Britain has just announced that it’s at war.

Johnson makes a strangled sound that might have been a laugh. “I would prefer not to, ma’am.”

“Of course not.” Amelia rubs her forehead as she thinks. “All right. Send a car to my flat, Johnson. I
need to get to Number Ten as quickly as possible to assess the situation.”

“Yes, ma’am. Would you like any of us to join you?”

Amelia considers it. “Two only. I’m a known face to all the war mages, but they’ve yet to meet most of you. I’ll call for further assistance if I think it necessary in dealing with their Ministry, but it’s more likely that I’m going to be sending you lot across the whole of Britain this morning to ascertain the collateral damage.”

She can all but hear Johnson grimace. “We’ll be certain to pack sack lunches, then. The car will be ready for you in twenty minutes, Madam Tyler. I will phone you updates if I receive them before you do.”

“Good. Take care, Johnson.” Amelia hangs up the phone and straps it to her wrist again. If she treats the run home as a sprint, she’ll have ten minutes at her flat to shower and change before the car arrives.

She hopes last night’s date left her a scone. It might be the last thing she eats for a while.

*          *          *          *

When her colleagues among the M.L.E. are through interviewing Amelia Bones regarding the events of last night, the first person she expects to see is her own secretary, Ila Patil. Instead, she has a cup of hot tea thrust under her nose by a ginger in horn-rimmed spectacles. Amelia is too seasoned at her job to blink at him, revealing the surprise she feels, but does not hesitate to accept the tea. “Mister Weasley. I was expecting Ila.”

“She’s a bit busy moving your office, ma’am,” Percy Weasley replies, straightening back up. He has a stiff bearing that’s softened by the tired slump to his shoulders. It makes him appear far less pompous than is his wont. “I’ll be returning to help her shortly, but I was nearest the tea pot when the M.L.E. released you.”

Amelia doesn’t sip at the tea until she’s used wandless magic, perfected over her years in office, to make certain it is not poisoned or drugged. “Thank you for the tea, Mister Weasley.” Then the rest of his words catch up to her. “What do you mean, moving my office? I’ve just done that!”

Weasley presses his lips together. Then he removes his glasses to clean them, wipes his eyes, and puts them back on. It makes her realize that there isn’t a bit of pompousness left to him, not right now. She wonders when he finally left that unpleasant mannerism behind.

Last night, possibly. When so many were fighting for their lives against You-Know-Who’s people.

“Ma’am, the British Ministry of Magic is officially at war,” Weasley says. The stiffness in his shoulders is reflected by his voice. “By our own law, we cannot be without a Minister for Magic. With Auror Scrimgeour dead and Barrister Thicknesse…unfit…the job of interim Minister officially falls to you.”

Amelia stares at him. Then she says, “Bugger me.”

Weasley winces. “Yes, well. I don’t believe there is anyone in Britain who would be pleased to hear that right now, Minister.”
Except Thicknesse, Amelia thinks, but shakes that thought away. “But the election—” she begins to say, foolishly, but Weasley shakes his head.

“There will still be the election, as scheduled, ma’am,” Weasley informs her, and then presses his lips together again. Nerves or grief, she doesn’t know. She does not yet know this particular Weasley enough to be certain she’s reading him correctly at all. “But that is a month distant. I apologize for being the bearer of such news, but you are needed now.” Weasley pauses. “I think having the recent head of the M.L.E. as a war-time Minister for Magic is quite possibly the best gift Wizarding Britain could receive, given the… the circumstances.”

Amelia sips at her tea again, setting her thoughts in motion and letting them stride along the multitude of paths she now has to consider. “Ila didn’t want to inform me, did she?”

Weasley’s smile is brief, but bright and guileless and young. “She’s just learnt that she’s to be Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic a month earlier than planned. She’s shuffling your office so as to… well. We’re all trying to distract ourselves for one reason or another right now, ma’am.”

“I see.” Amelia considers him. “Did you lose anyone last night, Mister Weasley?”

The grief is brief, but honest, before he adopts a polite mask. “Junior Auror Clearwater, ma’am. We—we went to school together, and dated for a time. The M.L.E. is hoping that I will be kind enough to inform her family.”

“And instead, you bring me tea,” Amelia notes, feeling a flare of sympathy. She had only Susan to lose, but Susan is safe at Hogwarts, and Amelia will see her the moment it is dubbed safe for the students to join their attacked or injured families. Others are not nearly so fortunate.

“As I said: we are distracting ourselves as best we can,” Weasley agrees. “After I visit the Clearwater home, I’ll be returning to your office.”

“Will you, then?” Amelia feels a moment of bitter amusement. “Inviting yourself to join my political ticket, are you, Mister Weasley?”

Weasley doesn’t deny it, which would have irritated her. She has not been blind to the fact that he has been quietly, expertly divorcing himself from Cornelius Fudge’s idiocy for some weeks now. “Ila Patil is an excellent secretary and will serve you well as an excellent Undersecretary, but she’s never done that job before. I have just been made redundant from that position by Cornelius Fudge’s unfortunate… murder.” Weasley swallows. “I can tell her what she’ll need to know. If you still require my assistance once she is aware of her duties, then that will be your decision to make, Minister. For now, it’s much less decision and far more necessity.”

“Quite right,” Amelia says in approval. His eyes widen in surprise before he masterfully hides it again. For a Weasley Gryffindor, he is quite good at certain Slytherin political traits. “Do not forget to give Ila coffee, Undersecretary Weasley. She’ll neglect it out of concern for all else.”

Weasley lifts his chin. “There is only one Undersecretary to the Minister, ma’am.”

Amelia snorts. “Not right now, there isn’t. I need the two of you more than I need to pay attention to the trivial limitations of job titles. Now, off with you. I doubt any of us will sleep today, so I expect you to return to show me where the absolute bloody hell my new office is.”

Weasley grimaces in momentary apology. “It’s the usual location. I apologize. We’re trying to do away with some of Minister Fudge’s choices of décor as quickly as possible. I know you might not care, but after the attacks, some of it is—it’s inappropriate.”
“I trust your judgment, Mister Weasley.” Amelia knows he has rarely heard that a day in his life based on the way he blinks as if slapped. “We will all do as we must.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replies, and hurries on his way. As he passes by a crowd, he is briefly pulled into an embrace by Arthur Weasley, who looks a bit mussed and filthy. His son doesn’t protest; Amelia hopes that is a sign of a ridiculous family rift healing itself.

Then she finishes her tea and stands. Weasley is correct. There is much to be done, and she was just handed over the responsibility for the whole of Wizarding Britain. “Folstoy!” she calls, gaining the attention of the closest Auror to pass by. “Get me Slytherin. I need to speak with him.”

“Which one?” Folstoy asks, looking a bit bug-eyed. Honestly, the Slytherin siblings have been in the bloody paper, and still the Ministry is full of fools who think it a lark and a trick.

Amelia frowns. “Nizar Slytherin, Folstoy. Tell him it is regarding our war mage problem.”

Folstoy now simply looks constipated, but Amelia has no sympathy for him. “Yes, ma’am.”

When she is approached by the younger of the two infamous Slytherin brothers, Amelia feels unwanted trepidation. Their first—and so far, only—meeting had not ended well. She took responsibility for that failure of temper, and of thought, but aside from his random hints delivered via house-elf, has no idea of what he thinks of her.

“Madam Bones.” Nizar Slytherin has no remaining hint of his impeccable grooming, not after a night spent fighting in the worst of the skirmishes. He has dried blood from untreated wounds on his face and hands, his robes are torn and hanging open to reveal rather old-fashioned shirt and trousers beneath, and he smells like…

Well, Amelia isn’t certain what scent is clinging to him, but it is highly unpleasant. “Thank you for agreeing to see me, Professor Slytherin.”

“Protectoris,” he corrects, his normally hazel eyes shining like grey steel. “If you ask me to discuss the war mages, and we are using titles, then it is Protectoris, Madam, or Bellum dux Magum.”

“Then I unfortunately must be Minister,” Amelia responds, enjoying the expression of momentary bafflement that crosses his bronze features. “The British Ministry of Magic must have a sitting Minister for Magic in times of war. I’ve no choice in the matter. The vote next month will decide if it is a permanent placement.”

“I see.” Slytherin draws in a breath through his nostrils and releases it slowly from his mouth, a calming technique similar to the one Ila has been trying—vainly—to teach Amelia. “What is your war mage problem, Minister Bones?”

“That there are too few of you,” Amelia says bluntly. “Can this be rectified?”

Slytherin stares at her, rubs at his forehead with two fingers, and then shakes his head. “Do we need more war mages? Yes, and those who are excellent candidates are already on my very short list, Minister. Will it make Wizarding Britain’s populace possibly feel more secure to know that there are more of us? Maybe. Will it do any good in the war effort at the moment? Not at all.”

“Why?”

“Because the irritating walking corpse ordered attacks only against Wizarding Britain!” Slytherin snaps. “Wizarding Britain as a whole does not recognize the war mages, so we are no more powerful now than we were yesterday. Even the attacks against non-magical families were individual efforts,
not raids conducted on the orders of a war leader.”

Amelia frowns. “I don’t understand.”

Slytherin rubs his forehead again in the same place. She wonders if he is dealing with a headache, or if it is a sign of frustration. “It’s old magic, Minister, and it obeys very old rules. When there were war mages in number upon this isle, they made a pact with all of those who sat upon this isle’s many thrones. A king or queen of Britain cannot send a war mage to attack another who is not actively threatening their kingdom. We can only defend throne and land against acts of war. It was a safeguard meant to ensure those many rulers could not use us against each other in their constant bids for power and conquest. Those rules also exclude personal vendettas. By the old standards, Voldemort—” Amelia hates that she flinches at the name, “—is a war leader. Unless he commands a direct attack against the part of Britain that recognizes a war mage, as the Queen has recognized us, then it means nothing. If you want war mages who are useful as more than mere political tools, then you’ll need to convince Wizarding Britain to accept us for who and what we are.”

Amelia thinks she now has her own headache to contend with. “Thank you for giving me my second political nightmare of the day, one which immediately follows the first.”

“You’re welcome.” To his credit, Slytherin also seems frustrated.

There is one thing she has forgotten, and this, at least, she can easily remedy. “Thank you for last night. I do believe your timely visit saved my life.”

“Thank Salazar,” Slytherin says in a dismissive tone. “He is the one who insisted I refine what talent for Divination I have.” Then he shakes his head and looks at her. “My apologies; you are welcome. Please do not leave yourself in such a vulnerable position again, not when there is a fucking walking corpse wandering the isle who would happily see you dead.”

Amelia bites back a smile. “I will take that under advisement. Please be kind enough to send word when you have arranged for the titling of more war mages. If I’m to convince Wizarding Britain to become fond of war mages for more than just historical reasons, I would like to be able to contribute to your interesting news articles. To support them, of course.”

Slytherin raises an eyebrow. “To do so publicly before the election might damage your chances of retaining the Minister’s seat.”

“Those who would vote against my placement would vote against my placement regardless of my stance on war mages,” Amelia replies dryly. Then she pauses. It’s a self-serving question, but she has one family member left to her. She will ask. “If You-Know-Who were to attack Hogwarts, would the war mages be capable of responding?”

Slytherin’s grin is sudden, sharp, and quite bloodthirsty. “I am Hogwarts’ named Protector, Minister Bones. That would come into play before the war mage title had the chance to respond to magic and land. Of course, given that Her Majesty named Hogwarts’ land and village as part of my legal estates, Voldemort would then have to contend with both magics. Alas, but I do not think he is stupid enough to try.”

“Good,” Amelia says, even though she is chilled by what he has just admitted.

Nizar Slytherin effectively owns Hogwarts. She has no idea what plans he might undertake that could threaten the only school of magic in Britain.

Amelia has no idea how to ask questions of his intentions for the school, not yet. For now, she
decides on diplomacy and gratitude. “My niece will be remaining within Hogwarts’ walls until this war is done and You-Know-Who is defeated. Thank you for ensuring her safety.”

Slytherin gives her a searching look before nodding. “Again: you are welcome. Excuse me, please. I need to collect certain individuals. I will send you word as to the names you will need to endorse by this afternoon. Return your chosen statements to me immediately.”

“Sunday’s paper?” Amelia allows herself a real smile. “You do not dilly-dally, do you?”

Slytherin simply looks annoyed. “Monday, actually. Besides, if you want inefficient allies, go find someone who can raise Fudge from the dead. I’m busy.”

* * * *

Ila Patil loves her job. She truly does. She was prepared for the leap from being senior secretary to the Head of Magical Law Enforcement to, potentially, becoming Senior Undersecretary to a Minister, if Madam Bones were to win the election.

She just wasn’t expecting it to be necessary to become Undersecretary right now.

“You’ll do fine.”

Ila looks up from her near-frantic shrinking of Amelia’s many necessary belongings for this transfer of office to find Percy Weasley standing before her, holding out a cup of coffee. “Uh?” is her elegant response.

Weasley takes pity on her, gently grasps her left hand, and pushes a coffee mug against her palm until her fingers close around it. “I know you’ve been awake all night. You need that.”

“Oh. Right.” Ila sips bitter coffee and tries to recall what the last five hours have been like. “Wait, you’ve been helping me the entire time, haven’t you?” she asks in startled realization.

Weasley smiles. “A bit. Well, actually, Madam Bones named us co-Undersecretaries until everything is straightened out and you know what your job will be like, so you might have to put up with me a bit longer—possibly even long enough to remember that I exist!”

Ila stares at him. Then she blurts out, “Oh, God, thank you!” and starts frantically drinking her coffee. When the mug is empty, she says, “I’ve no idea what an Undersecretary does! I thought I had the full month to study up on it!”

“An Undersecretary does whatever the Minister for Magic doesn’t wish to do, usually, but I don’t think Madam Bones is that type.” Weasley sounds amused and bitter, but Ila supposes that anyone working for Fudge would be less than pleased about the experience. Even the fact that Cornelius Fudge is dead does not change the fact that in life, he was a complete shite.

“No. I suppose…dealing with the press?” Ila has done that. “Records-keeping?”

“Only if you don’t hire minions to the lower positions to make certain the workload is spread out properly,” Weasley says. “And I doubt Madam Bones will be so, er, paranoid as to ban you from having your own necessary assistants.”
“He did what?” Ila sputters, outraged.

Weasley only smiles. “It’s done and over with. We’ll be able to do our jobs.”

Ila nods. Done and over with. Well, so was the peace she’d once been promised would be everlasting after You-Know-Who’s defeat in 1981. He has returned with a vengeance that makes her afraid for her entire family.

She glances over at Weasley, who has perched on the edge of the nearest barren desk. He is gazing at the wall, but with unfocused eyes, as if he is either tired or deep in thought. She remembers his thoughtfulness from their school days—when he was not being a pompous arse, at least. “Percy?”

“Well?”

Ila glances down at her empty mug and makes a decision. “When we’ve a free moment, would you like to go for a coffee in Muggle London with me? After you get new spectacle frames, at least.”

Percy stares at her, baffled. “Are you—are you quite serious?”

Ila eyes the mug again. She could use more coffee already. “About the spectacles? Certainly. Those are very 1950s, Percy, and it’s 1996.”

“Oh. But, I meant about the…the coffee?” Percy responds weakly. It’s the least confident he’s seen since he was a firstie. It’s sort of cute.

“Yes, I do,” Ila says decisively. “If we’re going to work together for the next month, then we should know each other well. We can’t be arguing procedure or having ridiculous personality conflicts before the Minister and the whole of the Ministry, can we?”

Percy slowly nods. “Of course not. Well.” He adjusts the large horn-rimmed frames on his face. “If you’re so keen to update my sense of fashion, any suggestions?”

“Something that lets a girl see more of your face,” Ila suggests, grinning. “It’s far easier to get a date when someone can see more of what they’re in for.”

“Date. A date.” Percy blinks a few times. “I will take your suggestions under advisement, Senior Undersecretary Patil. Shall we get back to work? We might be able to complete the transfer before afternoon tea if we push for it.”

Ila nods. “That is a sound plan, Senior Undersecretary Weasley.”

* * * *

Salazar can’t stop the wartime habit of keeping his eyes moving as he waits. He watches the traffic, the people passing by on the walkways—even the bloody rooftops. He doesn’t like standing here in the open, presenting as such an obvious target, but this is Downing Street. He would like to hope that Voldemort’s idiots have not yet grown the stones to attack the exterior of 10 Downing, or the public entrances to the Ministry of Magic, in broad daylight. The Death Eaters are traditionalists, ones who are much too fond of the International Statute of Secrecy. Even the ones who went rogue last night to attack non-magical citizens only targeted families who lived far enough away from other houses so as not to attract witnesses. Malditos bastardos.
The government car arrives five minutes after his watch beeps an alert for the appointed time. He watches as Amelia Tyler emerges from the back, quickly flanked by two suited men and women from the new agency within MI-5. They both bear the obvious bulges of pistols under their coats. Amelia forewent her preferred pencil skirt for trousers that match her suit top, but if she is armed, she is far less obvious about it.

“Madam Tyler. You’re late,” he says in greeting.

“My apologies,” Amelia replies. “I was not at home when the call came in, but I’m here now. I understand there is a situation.”

“There is. Come with me, and try not to mind the horror that is the more private hidden entrance to Britain’s Ministry of Magic.” Salazar turns and leads them along, passing 10 Downing Street and getting a brief nod from one of the undercover agents who always linger nearby. That one must be ending their shift, or they would never be so obvious about identifying themselves, even to a known ally.

“We’re going into the Ministry of Magic. Directly.” Amelia sounds surprised. It is not exactly something they ever discussed as a possibility.

Salazar has only to glance to his side to see Amelia. She is quick to be exactly where she needs to be, and he’s quite fond of that sort of efficiency. “Yes. I thought you’d prefer to see the chaos for yourself before we speak to the Prime Minister.”

Tyler nods. “While that isn’t how I thought this would be handled—yes. Thank you, Lord Salazar. Prime Minister Major will appreciate the lack of back-and-forth between our agencies if we bring him all that he’ll need to know at once.”

“Who did you bring with you?” Salazar asks as they cross a side street on the walkway. He veers left into a building that they normally cannot see, but his magic is holding the typical illusion at bay. Fortunately, they pass through without question, and he can release his hold on a very strong, very old ward that did not like being displaced, no matter how temporary the need.

“This is Ted Jenkins. I’m Jill Smith,” the woman says to introduce them both. Those are either very English names, or adequate false ones. Smith has short brown hair and a number of gun calluses on her square-shaped hands, marking her as former British military—as is the man, with his muddy eyes and a red desert tan on what used to be delicate northern skin. Bodyguards only; he thinks it safe to assume that Madam Tyler put the rest of her new department to work in assisting those non-magical families who were attacked.

“A bathroom, then?” Amelia asks in dry amusement when the door swings shut behind them. The line of commodes has the much older styling of carved wooden doors and panels for privacy, not to mention the pull chains that are finally beginning to pass out of common use.

“Agent Jenkins, Agent Smith, and Madam Tyler—please choose a commode, place one foot upon the lid, and pull on the handle hanging above you,” Salazar instructs.

“ON THE COMMODE?” Smith blurts in horror.

“How is that supposed to do—anything?” Jenkins adds, his jaw hanging open.

“Magic, you idiots,” Amelia says in blunt frustration. She immediately does as Salazar instructed and disappears in a flush of water. Salazar thinks again that Her Majesty chose well when she appointed Madam Tyler to head the United Kingdom’s Magical Liaison Department.
“Do we…are we traveling through the pipes? The water?” Smith asks, staring at the place Tyler had just stood.

“No. It is only a signal to arrange for your transport into the Ministry itself,” Salazar tells them, which is mostly true. It’s actually a fascinating dismantling and partial reassembly of many Port Keys, all of them working in tandem. He decides not to mention that the system wouldn’t work for them at all if he hadn’t arranged for their entry in advance. “Please hurry along. I’ve been awake all night killing idiots in defence of others, and we’ve a schedule to keep.”

It’s the last part that seems to break through their reluctance. Recent former military, then. Jenkins and Smith don’t hesitate to reach up to grasp the chain, place a foot upon the lid, and activate the system that causes them to vanish.

Salazar holds back a grimace as he does the same to join them. He despises this means of entry, but with an official declaration of war in place, the Ministry has activated the full might of its anti-Apparition wards. Not even a war mage can pass through them. Inconvenient, that, but even these wards will cease to impair him if Wizarding Britain ever gains sense enough to recognize the war mages as part of their world.

Granted, Salazar believes it might be easier to pick up the whole of Hogewáþ with his bare hands and walk her across the length of the isle. Nizar is much less pessimistic about their chances, but even he doesn’t think they’ll gain that recognition until the next generation of magicians controls the Wizengamot.

When he arrives at the edge of the Ministry Atrium, he finds the other three waiting for him. Amelia is watching the orderly chaos, the skin around her eyes tight with displeasure, but otherwise is putting on a great show of equanimity. Smith and Jenkins flank her, though Salazar suspects it is only their military training that is keeping them from gaping at the spectacle.

Magicians in varying states of dress—and styles of dress—are hurrying back and forth on their necessary tasks. Most are Ministry employees, but a great number of them are the volunteers who joined the M.L.E. during the night to help defend Wizarding Britain. Too many of them still sport injuries that have barely seen treatment, but St. Mungo’s reached capacity before dawn.

“They have no idea how to fight a war, do they?” Amelia asks in a quiet murmur. “Or are they simply out of practice, given the span of time between the end of the previous one and the beginning of this one? That is not an unheard of phenomenon.”

“A bit, but the Ministry did not do a very good job during the previous war,” Salazar responds, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. He could not guide that war but for his work in shadow, and it was years of frustration—years of hoping that his little brother’s rather insane Gryffindor parents didn’t get themselves killed before they could birth Harry James Potter.

He does not have to do that this time. He is not going to stand as witness to magicians who falter on the battlefield and are slaughtered for it. Nizar will be at his side, and they’ve allies that know how to stand and fight against everything Voldemort might attempt. Such thoughts warm him as much as they terrify him, but that is a fact of war that has not changed since his very first battle, centuries upon centuries ago.

“How many casualties?” Jenkins asks, though his eyes are lingering on a pair of magicians whose wardrobe forgot that 1658 was quite a long time ago.

“Thirty-five known non-magical casualties,” Salazar answers, “but those are only the ones we’ve been able to confirm for certain. They were committed by rogue elements of Voldemort’s followers,
not following a direct command.”

“Using the opportunity to sow chaos.” Amelia presses her lips together in restrained anger. “And
given the average night of fatalities in Britain, it may be some time before it is known if the other
causes of death were mundane.”

“There is nothing mundane about death.” Salazar glances at Jenkins. “Some of them are rather firm
in their desire to continue to emulate their ancestors, if it’s the clothing that concerns you.”

“More that I found it baffling. Thank you for the explanation, Lord Salazar,” Jenkins says.

“What about the, er, magical casualties?” Smith asks. To her credit, she only stumbles a little bit, but
her concern is genuine.

“A very large number of families were attacked, but there have been only eighteen confirmed
casualties. Most of them held positions within the Ministry.”

Amelia nods. “And the enemy?”

Just mention of them makes Salazar wish to be holding his wand. “Fifteen arrests or deaths, all of
them confirmed to be Death Eaters. I would prefer a higher count, but that is the trouble with raiding
parties versus a battlefield.”

“Too many bloody unexpected variables,” Jenkins mutters under his breath. “I hate that shit.”

“Sirius?” Salazar asks when he sees the other man approach. At least the mania of battle has worn
off a bit, and he looks more appropriately somber for the circumstances.


“Your Grace,” Amelia replies in kind. “Are you injured?”

“Nope. Not my blood. Salazar, if you get it done now, you’ll have the opportunity to meet with
Minister Bones. Otherwise?” Sirius lifts his hands into the air and shrugs. “God knows. I thought the
Wizengamot was a madhouse. This is worse.”

“They confirmed her as interim Minister?” Even if it’s a temporary position until the election, that is a
boon Salazar had not expected.

Sirius’s grin is sudden and sharp-edged. Miss Granger is correct; it does make him resemble his mad
grandfather. “After we confirmed the new Wizengamot seats, yes. There will be a lot of unhappy
Death Eaters once those new names become public knowledge. Several seats that Voldemort’s
people had now belong to those who want nothing to do with him.”

“Ran out of family members, did they?” Salazar asks, amused.

Sirius snorts. “Several of them. Urith Avery was rather spitefully pleased to point out that she is the
only Avery left who is not in Azkaban or happily deceased. Come along; if you’ll all follow me, I
can take you right to her.”

They find Madam Bones in the midst of directing further chaos. Recognizable Aurors trained in
basic magical first aid are helping other Ministry employees to create spaces for assisting those who
are still injured. Ila Patil and Percy Weasley are assisting Madam Bones, and neither are afraid to
raise their voices to make certain the right patient sees the right Auror, or to verbally flay someone
and remind them to wait their bloody turn. The moment they notice Sirius, Salazar, and their guests,
they completely take over the task, freeing Madam Bones from the responsibility.

Madam Bones wastes no time. She strides forward and halts in front of them. “Lord Salazar, thank you for your assistance. You must be our new representative from Her Majesty,” she says to Amelia.

Amelia smiles and extends her hand. “I am. Madam Amelia Tyler, Head of the Magical Liaison Agency within MI5, Her Majesty’s domestic Security Service. These are agents Jenkins and Smith, recent retirees from Her Majesty’s Armed Forces, who signed on with me during the formation of our new and necessary department.”

Madam Bones clasps Amelia’s hand in clear approval at both her manners and means of introduction. “Madam Amelia Bones of the Ancient House of Bones, Wizengamot member, recent head of our Magical Law Enforcement Division, and current interim Minister for Magic for the Ministry. It is a pleasure to meet you. I find myself glad that you’re willing to act as a go-between for myself and the Muggle Prime Minister, as I’m currently not certain when I would find the time to both meet with him, and to assure him that I am not Cornelius Fudge.”

Amelia raises an eyebrow. “Having experienced Cornelius Fudge for myself, I rather doubt Prime Minister Major would have any immediate expectations of such…manners. It’s the long-standing history of animosity between the two ministerial positions that will be difficult to navigate.”

Madam Bones looks resigned. “I’m aware of that difficulty, as well. Madam Bagnold, who held the position of Minister for Magic before Cornelius Fudge, did try to at least be less difficult than some of her predecessors, but I do believe Cornelius undid every single bit of progress she’d made before she resigned from her post.”

Amelia smiles. “Then we shall do our best to make things easier for you, for the Prime Minister, and for Her Majesty…and perhaps our war mages, as well.”

Madam Bones nods. “Let’s hope it is as easily spoken as done, then. Now: what do you need from me?”

Salazar alerts Jenkins and Smith of his departure with a gesture, glances at Sirius to let them know that the Duke of London will be remaining in their company, and slips away while Amelia and Madam Bones are engrossed in a discussion of necessary revisions of policy. He will rejoin Amelia when it’s time to move on to 10 Downing Street, but he isn’t needed for this.

He still wants to find it a bright spot that Cornelius Fudge is dead, and will never again trouble them with arrogant, pompous foolishness, but Salazar cannot forget the others who died with him—merely for the crime of living in the same house as the former Minister.

Salazar finds his brother in a small, private bathroom meant for higher-ranking Ministry staff, sicking up into a toilet. “You’re not usually one to sick up after a battle.” Not since the age of seventeen, at least.

“Fuck off.” Nizar grabs a daintily embroidered hand towel to wipe his face. “Tolerantu. I was starting to tire, and I can’t currently afford any slips.”

“Oh. That one.” Salazar tries not to make a face of disgust and does not succeed. Severus’s creation might be a good idea, but gods know he isn’t fond of the necessary vomiting afterwards. “Madam Tyler and Madam Bones are getting on well, so that is handled, and without further disaster.”

“Good. We’ve had enough disaster for the day. It will be everything else that might still bring more of it upon us.” Nizar retreats to the sink and rinses his mouth with cold water. “I assume you’ve
already made the arrangements via telephone.”

Salazar retrieves the mobile phone from his pocket and holds it up. “Whenever we’ve finished at Downing Street, we’re welcome any time. It’s a bit more rushed on the introductions than Her Majesty would like, but she trusts our judgment.”

Nizar straightens up and scowls at the folded mobile. “How long have you had that?”

Salazar gives him an innocent shrug. “For a while. How else was anyone from the Underground to contact me while I was in Hogwarts?”

Nizar grants him that. “I suppose an owl or a Patronus would be a bit obvious, wouldn’t it? I want one, by the way.”

“Do you even know how to use a telephone?” Salazar counters, grinning.

“You push buttons and talk back at the person who answers. It isn’t that fucking difficult,” Nizar retorts.

Salazar nods. That was an accurate description, if a simplified one. “I’ll see what I can do.” He rubs at his beard, wishing for a shower that he has no time to indulge in. Even the idea of casting a cleaning charm is wearying. “While Her Majesty did say she would await us, and grant us the time we needed, I’d prefer to get this done as soon as possible.”

“Yes,” Nizar agrees, but he’s glaring at the mirror hanging over the sink. It is magicked to speak, but someone seems to have slapped shipping tape over the carved lips. “He has to know, Sal. That fucking noseless walking corpse has to know that to command a direct attack against non-magical Britain is to gain a war mage’s unwavering attention.”

Salazar nods. “We would certainly know otherwise after last night.”

“Why the fuck is that bastard only intelligent when it’s so fucking inconvenient for the rest of us?” Nizar growls.

“It’s a passing annoyance,” Salazar says. “You’ll be killing him soon enough.”

“No, I’ll be doing something to him soon enough. The cards still say he won’t fucking die.” Nizar runs his hands through his hair, breathes out, and nods. “All right. Now I can face people again and not stab them for daring to exist in my immediate vicinity. Does Minerva wish to join us?”

“Minerva thinks that we might be stacking the deck in the wrong direction,” Salazar responds. “She suggests it be Filius Flitwick instead.”

Nizar frowns. “Half-goblin dueling champion. Puts forward mixed-species rights and capabilities. Actually terrifying with a wand when he’s allowed to be. If you see Minerva before I do, please tell her that is an excellent idea. I assume Filius is fine with it?”

“Minerva thinks that we might be stacking the deck in the wrong direction,” Salazar responds. “She suggests it be Filius Flitwick instead.”

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“He’s flattered, and a bit flustered, but I saw him in action during the night. He’ll make the sort of terrifying war mage that my old Court would have approved of.”

“Better old Castile and León’s ideas of a magical staff bearer than Myrddin’s,” Nizar says. Salazar has to agree; his Court would have had much more ease in comprehending the other three.

“Where is Severus?” Salazar asks, realizing that he is one of the few that hasn’t been seen since the madhouse of a fully staffed, half-panicked Ministry descended upon them.
“He took over some poor sod’s potions laboratory and conscripted them as an assistant, whether they were willing or not,” Nizar says. “He’s been working to replenish healing potions that are running low, both here and at St. Mungo’s.”

“Gods. I hadn’t realized—” Salazar feels an intense frustration for the fact that he cannot be everywhere at once. “He’ll need help with that.”

Nizar merely smirks. “I thought you’d be unable to resist, but it is true that another brewer at work would be a wise idea. Kingsley has been trying to contact other potions-makers and apothecaries, but most of them are still dealing with the attacks. I can handle the trip to Frogmore on my own, Sal. Everyone else is desperately needed here.”

He nods. Minerva is chivying her old co-workers in one M.L.E. department into being both useful and efficient about it. Nymphadora Tonks would be with the Aurors, at least until Nizar collects her. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black are off explaining to Kingsley, Madam Marchbanks, and new Head Auror Moody that while they were fortunate not to fight werewolves in battle yet, that doesn’t mean they won’t. The Ministry’s current methods for dealing with a werewolf will only drive more of them to join Voldemort. Even if they can’t yet change the laws, an announcement that it’s being considered would be beneficial to all except the walking corpse.

Before this morning, Salazar would have held no hope that such consideration would even make it to the Wizengamot to be discussed…but Death Eater deaths and arrests have tipped the balance of power in their favor. He doesn’t yet know if it is also enough to win Madam Bones the election, but he is not above bribing the undecided.

“Damn!” Salazar swears as he realizes a forgotten task. “I’m supposed to accompany Madam Tyler to Number Ten.”

“Oh, no, the horror. She might have to do the job to which she has been appointed without a magical escort,” Nizar says in a dust-dry voice. “I can make Sirius accompany her. He’s the Magical Duke over London; it would be an insult to the Prime Minister if he wasn’t present.”

“You’re right. I’d forgotten that, too.” Salazar forces himself to relax. Fighting and bloodshed bring out the worst of his paranoia, his unwillingness to allow loved ones from sight, but everyone involved are more than capable of taking care of themselves. He will manage; he has done so for a very long time now. “All right. I’ve some overseas contacts who might be able to help with the potions resupply, but I’ll find my own lab to confiscate in the meantime. Anything is better than waiting for our supplies to run out.”

Nizar takes an extra moment to towel the dried blood from his face and hair, makes certain his hands are clean, and then turns to face Salazar. “Come here, pendejo.”

Salazar steps forward and embraces his brother. “No foolishness, hermanito. You will survive what is to come.”

“You will, as well, or I’ll be having words with your idiotic corpse.”
Britain's Ides of March

Chapter Summary

Continuing fallout from the first battle that began a war.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the lovely comments the first chapter received. I tried to keep up with comments and then Brain Weasels happened and... well. There are a lot of kind comments out there. <3

And some of you gave me ideas. You should be proud of yourselves. *g*

“Here we stand, and here we again shall be
Upon the bitter shore of this briny sea
A tainted word, a quick flicker, a serpent’s lie
Magic and blood to make the whole world blind
Our great plan, our hope, cannot be for naught
But the curtain falls, the ocean swells,
Dark are my thoughts, and dark is my heart.”

Severus waits in patient silence until he’s certain that the couplet is done. “Shakespeare again?”

Nizar turns away from his contemplation of the dreary weather beyond the magicked window. It had shown a clear and lovely day before Severus hexed it. “Probably from that same lost play that Salazar and I were quoting in January. I don’t know where this part belongs. It just felt appropriate.”

“Yes. It is.” Severus flexes his fingers and grips his arms tightly, all the reaction he is allowing himself.

Voldemort’s presence is gone from Little Hangleton, and from the whole of the isle. The war mage’s awareness of threats to the land granted to him avails him nothing.

It is as if Voldemort ceased to exist.

The idea that the Dark Lord simply left Britain has merit, but none of them believe he has done so. He has hidden himself, possibly by the same means that Nizar and Salazar hid themselves from magical detection.
“How goes the brewing?” Nizar asks him, shedding his robes and resting them over his arm.

“I’m done. Between myself, Salazar’s assistance, and some imported potions from France and Spain, the Ministry and St. Mungo’s has enough to deal with our current casualties. The Ministry has put out the word that any potion makers in Britain who are in graduate courses in magical uni, who are apprenticed to a Master, or who are Masters themselves are to brew as many of the healing variant potions they are capable of brewing—with all ingredients to be supplied by the Ministry for their efforts.”

Nizar raises both eyebrows. “I suppose that includes myself, then. Do they expect any of us to sleep?”

Severus grimaces. “Anyone who is employed as a full-time instructor or apothecary is exempt from that ‘request’, though I have no problems doing what I can. If time allows for it.”

“Nor do I. It will keep Salazar from bitching about my lack of practicing my brewing.” Nizar wriggles his shoulders until his upper spine lets out a rather disturbing crack of released tension. “We’re otherwise done here, then?”

“Yes.” Severus ponders the question before has asks it. “And how did things go before Her Majesty?”

“You mean the confirmation of our four new war mages?” Nizar lifts his hand and tilts it in the air. “There was no issue with Elizabeth’s acceptance of their credentials. The difficulty was in getting everyone to shut up long enough to escape! Everyone wished to talk of Green Folk politics, Filius’s parents’ courtship, Fleur’s family and her natural magic, the status of mixed-species magicians in our society, and even bloody curse-breaking!” Nizar sighs. “I know she meant it to be…a distraction, from what we faced yesterday. I’ve just never had much patience for that sort of deflection. Tonks, Filius, Bill, and Fleur handled it much better than I did.”


“Fearless warriors of many talents, all of whom prefer peace to fighting but will tear you to shreds if you grant them the opportunity,” Nizar responds in a dry voice. “Honestly, they fit right in with the rest of us, Severus.”

“Probably,” Severus concedes, though the old habits of the Death Eater’s mask still wants to sneer over their inclusion. He is glad to know that at least he would have tread carefully, wary of Filius’s whip-quick bloody wand.

“Well, then before we leave the sanctity of this room…what’s bothering you, Severus?”

“Voldemort. His disappearance from our senses. I never thought I would loathe the idea of not being able to sense that fucking bastard’s location!”

Nizar nods. “That is disturbing me, as well. Wait until we’ve had at least a single night’s sleep, if not two, and then ask me if there is a way to find him despite the blood magic Voldemort is using to hide from our sight.”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Do you have a solution to that problem, then?”

“Maybe,” Nizar stresses. “I mean, I’m the one who taught Salazar the blood spell for hiding in the first place by proxy, so I should bloody know how to counter it.”
“By proxy?”

“Oh. The 992 portrait taught him,” Nizar answers, annoyed. “It was a good idea, but the portrait
admits to skipping one of the lessons that comes before that level of familial bloodwork, and I can’t
strangle a fucking painting.”

“Though I did try,” Severus says, maintaining an innocent expression. He’d been thirteen at the time.
Thirteen-year-olds have the right to make idiotic blunders.

“It was a hilarious failure, too.” Nizar glances around the potions laboratory once more before he
smiles at Severus. “Let’s go home. We can whinge dramatically in front of the students.”

“I do not *whinge*,” Severus retorts, but allows Nizar to lead him from the room.

*          *          *          *

Before Percy can escape the Ministry, he comes across his mother. She hasn’t noticed him yet,
engrossed in conversation with Madam Bagnold. Percy considers all that he had to lose last night—
and was fortunate enough not to—and makes a decision.

“Mum.”

Molly Weasley turns around and goes wide-eyed at the sight of him. “Percy?” she whispers, as if in
disbelief.

Percy straightens his shoulders. He has to get this right. “I want it to be said that while I do *not* agree
with some of your…political views,” he hedges. Not the right term, but close enough. “You are still
my mother, and I am beyond grateful that you, Dad, and all the rest of the family survived the night
without injury.”

“Oh, Percy!” Molly throws his arms around him. Percy manufactures a flinch he doesn’t feel before
briefly embracing her in return. “Does this mean that you’ll come home for the twins’ birthday dinner
on first April?”

Percy frowns. “If I can manage. I’ll be quite busy—Madam Bones wishes me to assist
Undersecretary Patil, at least until the election.”

Molly raises both eyebrows, but doesn’t comment. He knows better, though. His mother is not a
stupid woman. That he has been *asked* to assist Madam Bones given his recent, tragic insistence
upon following around Cornelius Fudge like a lost puppy will speak volumes to those who can hear
the notes at play. “And perhaps, a late card to Ron might be a kindness. He did miss you, even if it’s
only to disagree with you.”

Percy stares at her, nonplussed. It’s March fifteenth—no, sixteenth now. Why would he—

“Balls,” he mutters. Ron’s birthday was on the first. Percy was going to send something, at least
anonymously, so as to maintain appearances, and instead he utterly forgot. “I’ll do that, Mum. Has he
been asking for anything? That is not the fastest racing broom on the market,” he adds.

Mum beams at him. “Perhaps a bit of spending money for Hogsmeade would do. He might have
hinted about it. I mean, if they’ll be allowed to attend the next Hogsmeade weekend,” she says, face
falling.

“I don’t see why not,” Percy insists. “Even when there was a supposed mass murder out to kill us all, Hogsmeade weekends went on as scheduled.”

Molly narrows her eyes. “That is not exactly reassuring.”

“No. I suppose it isn’t. My apologies Mum, Madam Bagnold; I am departing the Ministry to visit the Clearwater Home in Cardiff.”

“The Clearwaters? Why would—” Mum clasps her hands to her mouth. “Penelope?”

Percy nods. “Yes. Last night.”

Molly crushes him with another hug, but he doesn’t mind this one so much. He still has no idea how to cope with the idea of losing Penelope, much less informing her family. “I’m so sorry, Percy.”

“Thank you.” He nods at Madam Bagnold, who only gives him a grave, professional smile in return. He rather does like dealing with those accustomed to Ministry life. They’re used to how things need to be said in brief before moving along to the next task.

Percy leaves the Ministry by Floo, glad that he has accomplished the task he set for himself with Betisa Slytherin’s gentle, portrait-based guidance: to partially mend the rift with his family. It will be much easier for them to accept his new talents—and his ideology—if they are not estranged.

He missed them, too. He thinks a revenge present for the twins’ birthday might be in order.

* * * *

Informing the Clearwater family of Penelope’s death in the line of duty is exactly as horrible as Percy knew it would be. He holds Mrs. Clearwater while she sobs against his shoulder, sounding as if her heart is broken. Mr. Clearwater lights a pipe and stares out the window facing the sea, grim, stoic, and silent.

Percy and Penelope realized after graduation that they weren’t meant for each other, but Percy still ate dinner in this home with her family. He was a welcome guest, more than once, even after the amicable breakup.

Damn the M.L.E., anyway. If they lose someone else, they can sod off and bloody well do this job themselves.

* * * *

When he returns to his flat in London, it’s a shock to realize that it’s nearly dusk. “Bloody hell,” he mutters under his breath as he undoes the wards on his door. He could have Apparated inside directly, but he’s so tired. All of Friday, all of Friday night, all of today—he is absolutely done in.

He knows he still won’t be able to sleep.
“Hello, Betisa,” Percy greets the portrait on his wall.

Betisa Slytherin pauses in the midst of brushing out her long black hair. “Hello, Percival. I thought you would return last night, but here it is now a full day later. Something must have happened.”

Percy sits down in the chair he leaves in front of her portrait and slumps forward. He thinks maybe his bones ache. His teeth certainly do. “You-Know-Who officially began his second war last night. It was…it was bad.”

“Have you lost family, dearest?” Betisa asks in a soft voice.

“No. I was lucky. Well—perhaps there are cousins I don’t yet know about, but no one close to me aside from a former girlfriend. I had to…I told her family.”

Betisa nods and sighs, placing her hairbrush aside, somewhere out of sight within the painting. “War is always hard. It was harder still when I was asked to walk the fields of war after a battle, as so many with missing loved ones wished to know if any could be roused back to life.”

“Were you ever successful?” Percy asks hoarsely.

She smiles, but even he can see the edge of sadness to it. “I was, yes. Sometimes there were several souls to be saved from a single battle, though most often there was only one. If there had always been none, I would have refused to keep doing it. Madness did not run in my family in those days, but I had no wish to chance the madness of grief.”

Percy bites his lip. Betisa has been teaching him Occlusion, the first half of learning Mind Magic. She claims he is decent at it, and will learn to be better. They have yet to try Legilimency, but Betisa is uncertain if one can use Legilimency against a portrait.

Salazar Slytherin has stopped by Percy’s flat a few times—always at random, always unannounced—and given him his first lessons in understanding what, exactly, Percy has always felt beneath his feet. It took another’s words, the description of knowing the same, to realize it’s an element he has felt close to for his entire life.

He likes to be grounded. He is fond of stability.

They have not yet discussed Necromancy teachings aside from disabusing Percy of his preconceived notions as to what the magic is for.


Betisa tilts her head in consideration and concern. The bloody Slytherin brothers have that exact same gesture. “You’re certain?”

“People are already dead because of this war,” Percy says. “If I can save even one person, then isn’t it worth it?”

Betisa lowers her head, but when she looks up, her smile is kind. “It is, yes. When do you wish to begin, Percival?”

Percy shrugs and slumps back in his chair. “I won’t be sleeping for a while yet, Betisa. It may as well be now.”
After Wizarding Britain’s initial shock wears off, everyone begins referring to the Friday attacks as Britain’s Ides of March. Draco is unfamiliar with the reference until Hermione and a few others fill in that annoying gap in his education.

The ides of March, a Roman religious holiday that fell on the fifteenth. A day for settling a debt owed to another. The same day the Emperor Julius Caesar was assassinated by conspirators who wanted—and failed—to restore the Roman Republic. It’s Weasley who informs Draco that a play written by William Shakespeare in the 1600s had a divinatory magician character who told Caesar to beware the ides of March.

Draco reflects in irritation that at least Caesar received a fucking warning.

Before those considerations plague him for most of Sunday, Draco has a job to do. Whether Dumbledore realized it or not, he made the Prefects’ jobs harder with his announcement. Most of the returned staff are all but sleeping on their feet, and aren’t really capable of reassuring anyone.

He is also far too annoyed that a useful adult turned herself back into a cat when the school is still in crisis. The Prefects and Head students all quietly agreed not to say anything about the Animagus, but the woman could have waited for things to settle down first.

He still isn’t sure why they all agreed to keep their silence. Maybe a fellow Slytherin reminded them all of the joys of potential blackmail.

Everywhere Draco goes in Hogwarts that Saturday evening, he finds furtive whispers, fearful faces, and students who are too concerned with the sudden introduction of war into their lives to think about mischief. He’d think it an easier task compared to the rest of the day, but reassuring others is—he is not practiced at it, and it doesn’t come naturally to him. Still, whenever Draco attempts comfort, he receives appreciative looks more often than not, even if some of that gratitude is accompanied by the hint of tears...or in some cases, actual sobbing. His robes are never going to be same after that session of reassuring the Bagnold twins that their mother is fine. Insane, given the report he read in the Prophet of her actions the previous evening, but unharmed, as are their siblings and fathers. Draco also makes a personal note to never anger Madam Bagnold or the Weasley matriarch, who both spent much of the night in the company of two Slytherin war mages.

Draco receives word by Millicent’s chimera Patronus that the Prefects and some of the older students are meeting in the Ravenclaw Common Room, of all places. He thinks about it while sending some first-years off to bed. No matter what they’re to discuss, it’s still an opportune moment to view a place he might once have considered enemy territory.

The Weasley twins’ opinion, voiced during winter break, was not emphatic enough. The Ravenclaw Common Room is very, very blue. While not the gentle green light of the dungeons, he still finds the color surprisingly soothing. The furniture is comfortable, if also insistent upon being blue.

Ginny is furious about being excluded until the other Weasleys do an excellent job of diverting her into realizing that the younger years in Gryffindor will need someone looking out for them until the impromptu meeting is over with. There is also an implication that the Weasleys will be informing their younger sister, regardless, but that is not Draco’s responsibility. Besides, he would want to know, too.

Zubeida is their other surprising holdout, and she doesn’t let her stutter stop her from tearing them a
new one when they ask her to leave. Luna remains downstairs long enough to soothe Zubeida’s temper and escort her up to the Ravenclaw dormitories. Zubeida is Slytherin enough that she can’t resist the opportunity to scout for useful secrets in Lovegood’s company.

After the older Ravenclaws have chased away everyone except for the fifth-years and up, they settle down in a quiet, sober group. Hermione has the folded Marauder’s Map in her hands, caressing the paper with her fingertips while staring at nothing. Draco watches, taking in the hint of nervousness to the act. “What happened?”

She starts in surprise. “Sorry. I was miles away. The Ministry—they didn’t know who was targeted until after dinner this evening, but Kingsley Shacklebolt was kind enough to let me know in person that the Death Eaters went after my parents’ home in London. Sirius knew that there was a home in danger, so they stopped them from doing anything terrible, but it was still…it’s still a bit frightening.”

Draco raises both eyebrows. Hermione is handling that sort of news better than he would be. “Your parents?”

“Oh, they were fine.” Hermione manages a smile. “They were on holiday in Brighton. The house was damaged, just the sitting room, and insurance will cover the damage, but…”

“It’s frightening,” Chang repeats, cradling a mug of steaming tea in her hands.

“Yeah.” Longbottom is sitting on the floor, and still is tall enough that he’s easily of a height with the girls seated on the furniture. “My gran sent me an owl. They tried the same against Longbottom Manor, but, uh…I have a feeling there isn’t much left of the ones who were that stupid.”

“How’s that, Neville?” Brocklehurst asks, wide-eyed.

Longbottom shrugs. “The family’s lived there a very long time. Some of the other types who live on the property with us—they’re a bit protective. If they hadn’t gotten them, the plants my mum planted when I was born likely would have.”

“Luna says her house is much the same. I was laughing off the tale of her family’s protective guardian entity thing until she told me how it ate a Death Eater during the last war.” Applebee shudders. “It makes me wonder what is on our family property that no one talks about.”

“It depends on the land in question, really,” Fleet puts in. “We don’t have anything like that after my great-great-grandfather went and angered everything in the parish.”

“We’re getting off track, here,” Ona says, frowning. “I thought the point of this was to discuss how to handle…well, everyone that was called away today.”

“We don’t even know how bad it is,” Terence protests.

They all turn around as the Ravenclaw’s heavy door swings open. Amrish escorts Adele inside, who doesn’t seem to have managed to escape anyone yet in order to have a bath. Her robes are cleaner, but there are still bits of dead grass in her hair. She is also limping, which makes Draco’s stomach twists up in nerves.

He’ll fight if he has to. He just doesn’t want to.

“Adele knows how bad things are,” Amrish says while helping Adele to sit. “She’s here to pass word along.”

“Are you all right?” Jordan asks, brow furrowed in concern. He helps Windcharm to make a cup of
tea, though Ona corrects their sugar and cream use to Adele’s preference.

“It’s not that bad. My ankle was broken at first. Now it’s simply annoying.” Adele smiles her thanks as she accepts the tea. “I’m really too exhausted to do this at all, but I thought you all deserved to know what to expect.”

They all look at each other: Prefects, Head Boy, Head Girl, and nosily concerned students. Draco thinks it says amazing things about the ones who turned up despite not being a Prefect. He might also be judging those who didn’t. Some of them have Death Eaters in the family and need to be politic. Some are probably afraid.

Others are all but Death Eaters already. Draco is definitely judging that lot.

“The Creevey brothers are orphans,” Adele says, and Draco momentarily forgets about allegiances and politics. “They have it the worst, since they have no other family—not any family that’s worth it, is the impression I get.” She grimaces. “Finch-Fletchley’s entire family is gone except for his eldest uncle.”

“God,” Edgecombe whispers, looking a bit green. “Poor Justin. And the Creeveys…”

“What about Blake?” Raquel Brown asks, reaching out to rest her hand on Edgecombe’s shoulder. “They weren’t in the dormitory this morning, either.”

“Their parents are gone, too, but they have other remaining family who are thankfully not bigots who would cast someone out for refusing to be a girl,” Adele says bitterly. “Oh, and speaking of bigots, Rufus Scrimgeour was killed by You-Know-Who personally.”

“You’d think old Voldie would have appreciated Scrimgeour, given that bit of nonsense Scrimgeour rattled off in his Prophet interviews,” George mutters, scowling.

“Not so much, it seems,” Windcharm says dryly.

“It’s still an important loss, even if he had…opinions,” Cadwallader points out. “And he was Head Auror of the M.L.E. Who’s going to replace him?”

“Alastor Moody,” Adele replies, and half of them flinch in reaction. “Yes, I know, but at least it’s the real Moody instead of an insane Death Eater.”

Higgs doesn’t look impressed. “There’s a difference?”

“Forget Auror Moody,” Hermione snaps. “Think politically! Scrimgeour was one of the three candidates for Minister for Magic.”

“And now it’s down to Madam Bones and Barrister Thicknesse.” O’Flaherty tilts her head. “Madam Bones hasn’t been specific, but given what happened to the Bones family in the last war, she’s likely ready to burn You-Know-Who to cinders.”

“Whereas Barrister Thicknesse sounds like my father,” Draco says in disgust.

“Not just yours,” Millicent reminds him placidly.

“We should hurry it up. Adele, what else?” Kartik asks, which makes Draco feel a flush of guilt. Adele is all but nodding off in her chair.

“Death Eaters went after Enid Pettigrew, Peter Pettigrew’s aunt, who is on the Wizengamot,” Adele
says. “They missed her and killed Peter Pettigrew’s mother, instead.”

Kinjal sighs. “That’s terrible. They’d both just spoken against Peter Pettigrew.”

“They disowned him, which is infinitely worse if you’re a Pure-blood,” Adele corrects her.

“I feel awful for his aunt and his mum, though. He’s the one who deserved what he got, the little rat traitor,” Weasley mutters.

“Maybe,” Adele says, but she seems too tired to stir up any real anger against a traitor. “There is so much, and it will have to be summarized. I just…it’s too much, otherwise.”

The rest of the casualty list isn’t as bad as the Creevey brothers and Finch-Fletchley being orphaned so thoroughly, but it’s still unpleasant. Katie Bell lost her older brother, Auror George Bell. Richard lost his older brother as well, Auror Thomas Vaisey. One of the junior Aurors and a recent Hogwarts graduate, Ravenclaw Penelope Clearwater, was killed in the fighting. Sloper’s older sister, Auror Martha Sloper, died defending a family from Death Eaters.

Wizengamot member Elphias Doge, who Draco suspects was also in the Order of the Phoenix. Ancient Dexter Fortescue, head of the Fortescue family, who’d been a Wizengamot presence for two centuries. The old Hogwarts Headmaster didn’t die in a battle, but of heart failure shortly afterwards. Regena Shacklebolt, older sister to Head of the M.L.E. Kingsley Shacklebolt, who’d held the Shacklebolt family seat on the Wizengamot. Cornelius Fudge—Draco doesn’t consider that to be a loss, as Fudge was utterly useless, but he does have a moment’s sympathy for Fudge’s wife and her family, all of them killed when Death Eaters targeted the former Minister. A previously unknown wizard named David Morrow, who Adele identifies as Dean Thomas’s father…and then mentions why he was targeted.

“They went after Dean’s useless father, and Dean’s mum?” Brown gasps in horror.

Adele nods sadly. “There were other attacks that Voldemort didn’t order. Rogue Death Eaters went after known families of Muggle-born magicians. Finnigan accompanied Thomas to the Ministry this morning so he wouldn’t be alone. Oh, and Lucille Frobisher, Vicky Frobisher’s aunt. She died as well, but as a Death Eater, not a victim. She’s the one who killed Pettigrew’s mother, and Madam Pettigrew did not take that well.”

“No kidding. She would have torn Frobisher to bits,” Nandini says in sympathy, but Draco isn’t feeling that charitable. There might not have been wind of it in public after the last war, but his mother informed him as to the Frobisher family’s Death Eater allegiance.

“The Macnairs were targeted—the ones who refuse to be Death Eaters,” Adele continues. “Poonima’s family and Yatin Bhagat’s parents, as well as the Ollivanders, the Goldsteins, the Macmillans, the Bainbridges, the eldest Bole, the Greengrass family, the Abbotts, Theo’s mum, old Muriel Prewett, the Zabinis, and the Weasleys—they’re all fine.” Adele says before the Weasleys can react. “Professor Slytherin says your mother weaponized the garden gnomes.”

Fred snorts. “That sounds like Mum.”

“Raza Mohammad’s mother was badly injured in a fire, but St. Mungo’s believes she’ll make a full recovery. Oh, and Professor Shafiq’s ex-husband was killed, but their daughter, Rose, was safe at uni. Kellah is off with the professor to see to the rest of their family. Susan Bones is with her aunt, I think just so they can reassure each other that they’re fine. That’s all of it that I can remember,” Adele finishes.
Draco glances at Warrington. They’re both aware of who Adele didn’t name, despite mentioning the dead Frobisher Death Eater. Warrington looks around before mouthing, Captured?

He gives Warrington a slight nod. It’s not the only possibility, but it’s kinder than telling Warrington that a lot of Death Eaters they’re both related to might be dead.

“I’m off to bed,” Adele announces, standing up and wobbling on her feet until Amrish jumps up to steady her. “Ask the others to be easy on our teachers tomorrow. It was a very long night, followed by a very long day of dealing with the bureaucratic aftermath in the Ministry.”

They wait until the door closes behind Adele and Amrish. Then Roshan bursts out, “It might well have been easier for them to say who didn’t get Death Eater visitors last night!”

“And I imagine there were others that the M.L.E. didn’t need to assist because of Unplottable properties,” Spinnet says. Then she glances at Draco. “Or other allegiances.”

“Malfoy Manor does tend to take care of itself,” Draco agrees without addressing the other implication. “Not nearly as dramatically as Longbottom Manor.”

Longbottom shrugs again, smiling. “The worst part is that my gran was probably sitting outside to enjoy the results.”

“Come on, everyone,” Fawcett says, standing up. “It’s almost final curfew. We should get back to our Houses and spread the word.”

Draco allows the flow of the crowd to carry him to Hermione’s side. She wouldn’t be insulted if he didn’t, but he was raised to be a gentleman. He escorts her all the way to Gryffindor Tower before bidding her goodnight.

He doesn’t sleep well that night. He knows his mother is fine; a servant or Mother’s hired goblin accountant from the Manor would have informed him otherwise. He worries, though. If she is still acting as a spy, then she might have had to…to hurt people last night. Narcissa Malfoy is a Black and pragmatic enough not to let such things weigh on her, treating them as a necessity in her chosen role, but Draco does not want to think about his mother and casual murder in the same sentence. Not even on the same continent.

Sunday morning at breakfast, Professor Snape sends word to all of the Slytherin Prefects that there is to be a brief meeting in the Common Room after the meal. Draco tucks the message away in his robe pocket, glancing around the Slytherin table. Greg, the Carrow twins, and Tracey Davis are back at breakfast, acting as if they never left the castle, but the others who were gone Saturday morning are still absent. Patricia Stimpson is the only Gryffindor to be back at their table; the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws who left yesterday morning are all still missing.

It was worse for them, Draco thinks, and feels his appetite vanish.

Hermione isn’t at the Gryffindor table. He wonders if she was allowed to visit her home in London for the day, if only to assure her parents that everything is fine. As well as can be, at any rate.

Draco gets up and goes over to the Ravenclaw table to join Lovegood and her copy of the paper. The Daily Prophet has been a bit better about their reporting since Fudge abandoned the office of Minister, but the Quibbler has always been honest. Completely mental, and full of ridiculous notions, but when Mr. Lovegood reports actual news, he’s dead-on.

That…was a poor choice of phrasing.
“They haven’t released the arrest lists yet,” Lovegood informs him quietly. She has been subdued since Hermione and Pansy found her out on the covered bridge, speaking of magic being upset. He supposes magic hasn’t exactly had reason to calm down yet. “My father slipped a message into the Quibbler to let me know. The Ministry hasn’t told any of the papers of the arrests and enemy deaths yet. Madam Bones ordered everyone to print about those who were attacked first.”

Draco nods, briefly scanning the article on the front page. Names jump out at him: Sloper, Shafiq, Longbottom, Finch-Fletchley, Shelby, Prewett, Creevey, Granger, Thomas, Macnair, Clearwater (that one is new) Shah, Doge, Fortescue, Mohammad, Goldstein, Macmillan, Nott, Bhagat, Shacklebolt, Zabini, Ollivander, Bones, Stirling (Kellah Shafiq’s father), Pettigrew, Bainbridge, Croaker (also new), Belby, Fudge, Weasley, Morrow, Bagnold, Scrimgeour, Tonks (oh, Mother will not be pleased about that), Greengrass, Abbott, Bole, and Dumbledore—arson took out the empty Dumbledore home in Godric’s Hollow.

Then he sees the name Harper and grimaces. He never realized Maxwell wasn’t with them yesterday. The fourth-year Slytherin is far too good at going unnoticed. He managed to get out of three different exams in his second year by simply not showing up, his absence unnoticed by those professors. When Professors Sprout, Binns, and Sinistra informed Harper that they had no exam from him, Maxwell responded with terrifying levels of acted innocence that of course he’d been there to take the exam. They…hadn’t lost his work, had they?

Most of Slytherin House resolved as one body that they were never gambling against Harper after that term, and anyone who did quickly learned that it was a fast way to lose Galleons.

Their Head of House isn’t seen in the Great Hall, but when they file back into the Common Room, Professor Snape is waiting for them. He still looks tired, but unlike last night, he is once again dressed and groomed as impeccably as ever. “Good morning. I have unfortunate news for you all, beyond what was carried by the reports in the newspapers.”

Draco tries not to grimace in dismay. This means it’s time to discuss captured Death Eaters…or dead ones.

“Most of those present recall Marcus Flint.” Professor Snape’s gaze sweeps the room. “It is my sad duty to inform you that he perished during the recent assault against Wizarding Britain.”

Draco flinches. He wasn’t expecting that at all. Given the gasps of surprise he hears, he isn’t the only one. It’s annoying, though; he didn’t even like Flint, but he spent too much time playing Quidditch with him not to feel some sort of pang.

It’s not just a pang. It’s also dread. Fear for himself, for other Slytherins, for Hermione, his mother, and all of the allies he has made in the other Houses since deciding he wanted nothing to do with the Dark Lord.

“What happened to him, sir?” Ichijoh asks.

Professor Snape does not hesitate to answer. “He was killed by the defences in place around a Pureblood family’s home.”

“‘The home of blood traitors, you mean,” Mafalda Prewett mutters.

Professor Snape eyes her in cool disdain. “Even if that were the case, it does not change the nature of their lineage, Miss Prewett. Now then: as in keeping with my promise of being honest with those of my House, and in trust that this news will not travel across the school as if you are nothing more than gossiping dunderheads, I will inform you as to the rest.”
Draco keeps his face as impassive as he can manage. Professor Snape isn’t returning to the long game in which he still served the Dark Lord, but he is still using part of a Death Eater’s Pure-blood dogma to its best advantage. Some of those who did like Flint—oddballs—are glaring at Prewett for being more concerned about the target’s blood status than about their dead former classmate.

“Felix Davis was captured and revealed as a Death Eater during a raid against the Bainbridge Estate,” Professor Snape says, and Tracey gasps.

“Dorcus Carrow was arrested and charged with Madam Regena Shacklebolt’s death.” The Carrow twins look murderous at the news.

“Lauranna Bulstrode-Fleet was arrested for an attempted assassination of Madam Amelia Bones.” Millicent merely looks bored. She either knew already, or doesn’t give a damn. Herbert Fleet in Hufflepuff is more likely to be affected by that news—Lauranna Fleet is his aunt by her marriage to Dagger Fleet.

“Gertrude Flint learned the news of her son’s death while under arrest.” No one seems much bothered about that, as no one liked Flint’s mother. She always made Marcus seem downright pleasant in comparison.

“Basil Greenwood was arrested for raiding the Ollivander Estate in full Death Eater regalia.” Adele makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like a frustrated, mournful growl. It’s an interesting combination, but otherwise her expression is stone.

“Corinthian Goyle did not manage to kill anyone during his attack on the Fortescue family, but as former Headmaster Dexter Fortescue succumbed to heart failure shortly thereafter, the Wizengamot might feel murder charges are still in order.” Gregory grunts in displeasure at the news of his uncle’s arrest, but otherwise doesn’t react. Odd. Greg and Vince aren’t entirely stupid, though many believe otherwise. Draco wonders if Greg expected at least one family member’s arrest.

Shit. Draco does not want to spy on his friends for having idiot relatives, but if Greg knew the attack was going to happen…

Shit! Bloody fucking shit! Even his mother would excuse his language in this instance!

“Constantine Pucey was arrested and, fortunately for him, merely charged with arson for setting the Tonks family home ablaze,” Professor Snape informs them dryly. Adrian still scowls, his face dark red and unpleasant. Draco wonders if Adrian is angry about the charges, or that his father was caught so easily. Arson, for Merlin’s sake!

“Though they have no children in Hogwarts, I know several of you are related to them by marriage or blood. Herbert Gibbon was arrested for his actions against the Doge family, particularly in regards to Elphias Doge’s death. Thorfinn Rowle was arrested for participating in the assassination attempt against Madam Bones, but he is also currently missing his legs, so I hope he considers it worth the loss.”

Professor Snape pauses, as if considering his words. “Those who died while assaulting others number among several formerly respected members of the community: Hector Selwyn, Cornelius Yaxley, Jerome Bluebell, and Lucille Frobisher.”

Draco listens to the students mutter among themselves at that revelation. He thinks he understands now why Madam Bones wanted the focus to remain on those who were attacked as long as possible—the arrests and deaths are political repercussions waiting to happen.
“Professor Harper’s wife, Matilda, was attacked and murdered in her home by unknown assailants. I know that Hogwarts’ music professor is disliked by most of you, but as he is now a widower, you will respect his grief and behave in his classes, or you will answer to me,” Professor Snape warns them.

Draco is very glad he does not take that class. His mother gave him a much more thorough education in magical music and history, anyway. He feels a moment’s guilt for that thought and then places it aside. He has so much more to contend with, and Professor Harper is an adult who can take care of himself. It’s Maxwell who will bear watching when he returns to Hogwarts. Draco doesn’t know how receptive the other Slytherin will be to a Prefect’s prying, but it is Draco’s job, and he will perform it.

“Several others from a multitude of families were captured or killed, though thankfully I do not have to concern myself with them, as that does not directly affect anyone within this House.” Professor Snape grants them all a narrow-eyed stare. “Make no mistake: every House was targeted, and every House had students who are currently with their families due to Friday night’s events.

“No matter your political views, understand that the Dark Lord attacked Slytherin families with as much brutality as he did any other. A lack of casualties does not mean a lack of intent.”

Professor Snape straightens his shoulders, his expression glacial. “I have no idea what the rest of this school term will be like, which puts me in a foul mood. I do not like being unable to plan accordingly for your well-being, even if you are entirely ungrateful that such plans are made at all.

“I expect you to remember that we are Slytherins. We are loyal to this House and to each other. In times of war, you cannot afford to do otherwise.”
Elusion

Chapter Summary

A proper Slytherin thinks of plans within plans within plans.

Chapter Notes

A couple of people have mentioned that my Voldemort is more intelligent than Canon!Voldemort. He's not--this really is Canon!Voldemort, arrogance and all. It's just the storytelling that's showing it better, is all. *whistling*

Also, I had a shit week, so I'm giving you guys a chapter because I don't want other people to be having shit weeks, too.

Wizarding Britain has officially been at war for nearly thirty-six hours, and Nizar has yet to sleep. The battle lust singing in his blood kept him awake through that long Friday night, but then there was the Ministry to contend with: recounting events; telling the same tale over and over again; giving testimony in regards to who lived, who died, and why. He’d even granted the stubborn bastards in the M.I.E. a Pensieve-held memory to prove his own precognition, the warning of danger that had saved the life of now-interim Minister for Magic, Madam Amelia Bones.

He also had time to learn the names of the dead.

They run through his head like a litany, and it’s the sort of litany that Nizar has never liked. It’s not remembrance; it’s a haunting, and he already had enough ghosts, thank you very much.

Getting their four new war mages declared was a kind distraction. Then Nizar had returned to the school with Severus, Minerva, Adele, and Salazar, which held a castle full of students who quietly listened as Dumbledore told them of the starting war.

Sunday is going about as well as anyone can expect. Even the castle ghosts are subdued, leading Nizar to catch his second glimpse of the infamous Nearly Headless Nick in as many days.

He still nearly blasts a Patronus with his wand when a fucking transparent elephant comes charging through the wall nearest him and bellows in Alastor Moody’s voice: “CONSTANT VIGILANCE! ISN’T THAT WHAT I’VE ALWAYS BEEN SAYING?”

The elephant vanishes abruptly, and is replaced at once by Kingsley’s far more sedate lynx. “If you receive this Patronus, you’re needed in the Ministry at once.” Then the lynx is gone, too.

“What the fuck,” Nizar mutters, before he Apparates directly downstairs to Severus’s office. There is a smoking crater in the office wall.

“Alastor Moody and his fucking Patronus!” Severus seethes. “Did you get a different message?”

“Only to report to the Ministry. I suppose we’ll find out there,” Nizar says, eyeing the crater. “Sal can
Severus takes them to his quarters by Apparition and reaches for the jar that holds his Floo powder. “It can’t possibly be as bad Friday night. It’s too soon.”

Nizar is already grimacing at the idea of needing to Floo to the Ministry, but that statement nearly makes him feel ill. “Never underestimate an enemy’s bloodlust once they’ve finally succeeded in spilling it.”

Severus glances up as the flames turn green. “Speaking from experience?”

“Quoting Godric, actually.” Nizar takes a deep breath, waits for Severus to vanish into the fireplace, and then shouts their destination. He closes his eyes for the entire unwanted, spinning, nauseating journey, and is once again saved from landing on his face by Severus’s quick catch on the other side. “Thank you.”

“One day, you are going to learn how to exit the Floo like a graceful human being,” Severus responds dryly.

“One day, British cave trolls may be civilized beings fronting a polite, economically and socially advanced society.”

Severus stares at him. “Are we…trading nonsensical statements again?”

“You started it,” Nizar replies, glancing around at the growing crowd. It is largely made up of Aurors and Order of the Phoenix members, all of whom are slowly moving away from the bank of Floos along the wall of the atrium to make room for those still inbound. Madam Bones is standing next to Kingsley, her mouth set in a tight, unhappy line. “Shit.”

Severus has followed his gaze. “No, that is not a good sign,” he murmurs. “The news is bad, but no one else is dead. That we yet know of, anyway.”

“How can you tell?”

“Kingsley.” Severus tilts his head at the head of the M.L.E. “He often takes murder personally, but there is no new grief on his face aside for that of his sister.”

“So, the walking corpse has done—” Nizar freezes as the realization occurs to him. Then he begins elbowing his way to Madam Bones, Kingsley, and Alastor, who has stumped up on his wooden leg to join them. Severus curses and follows. Nizar wonders if he’s realized what Voldemort must have done, or if he’s voicing simple frustration in trying to keep up with Nizar.

Salazar always excelled at navigating crowds. He is waiting there with Minerva and Filius by the time Nizar and Severus arrive. Madam Bones, Kingsley, and Alastor’s ranking means that there is a slight bubble of empty space around them as junior members of the Ministry give them a respectful amount of elbow room. Dumbledore follows along right after them, stepping into the group as if he has full right to be there—though Nizar is not being fair. As current Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot (stupid title), Dumbledore is exactly where he should be. Nizar just doesn’t want him there.

“It’s Azkaban, isn’t it,” Nizar says. “He’s gone and fucking emptied that horrific travesty you refer to as a prison.”

“And how would you know that?” Alastor demands before anyone else can speak.
“Because I was trained by Master of War Godric Gryffindor, and it’s the only thing that makes sense in regards to Pettigrew’s arrest, Friday’s fighting, Voldemort’s disappearance after Scrimgeour’s death, and calling everyone here without immediately arranging to send us out to defend others!” Nizar snaps in frustration.

“That is what has occurred, yes,” Dumbledore confirms. Madam Bones’s frown gains further ire.

“You seem to be good at knowing what others are up to. Unless you’re in on it, of course,” Alastor says.

Nizar narrows his eyes. “I’m billing you for damages caused by your sending of that fucking elephant Patronus.”

Alastor snorts and then grins. “Now that is proper vigilance, Master War Mage.”

“I’m the one who put the hole in the wall,” Severus growls.

“Aye, but you’ve always had a notion of proper vigilance,” Alastor says in complete lack of concern.

“Join the others, please,” Kingsley requests. “I’m about to make the official announcement. The press is here; there will be no hiding this from the public.”

“Wait.” Salazar is frowning when Nizar glances at him. “You said Azkaban has been emptied. What of those who Fudge interred there unjustly? The scheduled trials for their releases were not yet complete.”

Madam Bones, Kingsley, and Alastor trade glances. Dumbledore lets out a heavy sigh that, once again, holds no sign of artifice. “He took them, didn’t he?” Minerva asks quietly.

Madam Bones nods. “Yes. All of them, including the guards. There are signs of a struggle. It is obvious that there were those who…who did not wish to depart.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck! Nizar chants in his head, stepping back with Severus, Salazar, and Minerva so that the current heads of British Wizarding government can be the bearers of ill news.

“My friends: thank you all for coming on such short notice,” Kingsley begins, clasping his hands together. It is a gesture that speaks of compassion while also revealing he holds no wand. “I am sorry to inform you of bad news when we are still recovering from Friday’s dire events, but the situation has left us no choice.

“While we fought to defend the people of Wizarding Britain on the Ides of March, it seems You-Know-Who had diversion in mind as well as murder and chaos. From what we have been able to piece together from the scant evidence there is to be found, one of the guards who oversaw prisoners on Azkaban might have been an unMarked Death Eater. There is also the distinct possibility that they were subjected to the Imperius Curse, but until we find them, we won’t know which it is.”

“Who?” someone shouts from the rear of the crowd, trapped near the Floos. “Who is it?”

Kingsley hesitates before his lips twist in anger. “Beatrice Parker,” he answers. The muttering begins at once, disbelief and outrage, before Kingsley holds up his hands to request silence. “She disengaged the anti-Animagus charms on Peter Pettigrew’s cell. The two of them then opened the cell for every single prisoner of Azkaban. An illegal port key was used to ferry all of the formerly incarcerated Death Eaters from the island to the mainland, and from there they have vanished from our sight.
“What is worse is this: there were unjustly accused prisoners in Azkaban waiting their turn before the Wizengamot to secure their release. There are multiple signs of prisoners who were forcibly removed from Azkaban. This includes all of the guards stationed there. We don’t yet know what You-Know-Who plans to do with these innocents, but given his acts during the last war, I doubt he plots kindness.”

“How the hell did we find out?”

“Why did it take this long?”

“What about those we captured on Friday night?” another Auror yells, and that is who Kingsley chooses to answer.

“We didn’t have time during the initial chaos to ferry those prisoners to Azkaban. They were kept here in the Ministry holding cells,” Kingsley explains. “This Sunday morning, the first set of Aurors and prisoners traveled to Azkaban. That is when the island was discovered to be empty.”

“Empty,” Minerva repeats, suddenly looking pale. “Entirely empty?”

It’s Madam Bones who nods. “Yes. You-Know-Who has taken the Dementors, as well.”

No one has a restful Sunday evening. Minerva, Salazar, Severus, Nizar, Filius, Dumbledore, Pomona, Sasha, Hagrid, Rolanda, Poppy, Charity, Aurora, Bathsheda, Septima, Quintinus, Eustas, and even bloody Binns spend most of those late hours discussing their options. As far as Nizar is concerned, the only one of import they decide upon is in regards to the fucking Dementors.

“As Headmaster and Chief of the Wizengamot, I am supposed to have the ability to ban a Dementor from entering Hogwarts,” Dumbledore says in grave concern. It still drives Nizar bloody mental that Dumbledore can be callous about so many things, and yet be so genuine when true danger arrives. “However, since the Dementors may have willingly joined with Voldemort, that ability is in doubt.”

“But mine is not,” Salazar counters. He is leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest. Nizar only sees him look that pensive and brooding when it comes to threats to Hogewáþ. “I will adjust the wards. I can’t yet expand them to the full extent of land and forest that they should protect, but no Dementor will enter these grounds.”

“But we can’t save a fool who wanders beyond them if a Dementor comes calling,” Rolanda mutters. “What do we tell the students?”

“Hogsmeade weekends are certainly canceled, if there are Dementors roaming the countryside,” Pomona says.

“We don’t yet know if they’re roaming anywhere,” Eustas argues. “We could be concerned for no reason at all!”

“No matter the evidence for it or not, we keep the students’ safety in mind at all times,” Minerva reminds the man, scowling.

“I might be able to do something about Hogsmeade in regards to keeping the Dementors out,” Nizar
finally volunteers. “Please note that I am not guaranteeing this, as I’m not certain the means exist. I can only say that I will try. If I fail, then I think Pomona is right regarding the students’ Hogsmeade weekends.” Pomona regards him in near-astonishment, as if she’d expected Nizar to argue with her.

“And we won’t be able to keep the truth of the Dementors’ escape from the students, whether we wished to or not,” Aurora reminds them. “The news of it will be in Monday’s paper. We should be prepared to speak to them at breakfast of everything that will mean—and to reassure them, given what Salazar says of our wards.”

“Is that a certainty?” Charity asks Salazar, her expression pinched and unhappy. “I have to admit, I’d rather hide in this castle than face a Dementor, no matter how claustrophobic I become as the term progresses!”

“The wards are a certainty in regards to the Dementors. It’s an army you should concern yourselves with, and it’s an army that Voldemort now has,” Salazar says.

To Nizar, it feels like the temperature in the staff lounge plummets by several degrees. “You don’t think he would attack Hogwarts, now, do you?” Hagrid asks, shifting nervously and causing his chair to let out a creak of desperate protest. “He’s never once dared it.”

“Not while I’m here, he won’t,” Nizar says. “No, I’m not boasting,” he adds, nearly rolling his eyes when far too many staff give him looks of disbelief. “As long as there is a Protectoris standing watch over this castle and these lands, he’ll hold back. He’ll wait for certainty.”

“You mean he’ll try to kill you,” Filius says in displeasure.

“Pfft. He’s tried that already, and it didn’t avail him much more than a complete loss of dignity, an obvious defeat, and a large hole in his face,” Nizar replies.

“There is also his concern in dealing with me,” Dumbledore says, a faint hint of disapproval in his voice. There is the beginning of the power-grab; Nizar has been waiting all weekend for Dumbledore to reassert himself. “Voldemort has never dared to confront me directly, and while I am still Headmaster of this castle, he won’t.” Dumbledore pauses. “Tom also…if he loves anything other than himself, he loves this school. I believe it would take true desperation for Voldemort to direct his Death Eaters to attack Hogwarts.”

“All right. What are the plans, then?” Bathsheda asks. “Are we still on for cancelling classes for the first two days of this week?”

“Perhaps through Wednesday, even,” Dumbledore confirms. Nizar notes Minerva’s expression of disapproval, and wonders if there was an argument between Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress that he is not yet privy to. “There are students who are still with their families, and others who will be returning here as orphans. They will need our understanding when they return, not to be tossed head-first back into lessons the moment they step through the doors.”

And there is his genuine ability as Headmaster, Nizar thinks in amusement. He hasn’t lied to the others when he claims Dumbledore to be good at his job. One can see another’s skill and still not trust them within an inch of their fucking lives.

“At breakfast, I will announce the new dangers, though I imagine the Daily Prophet and its competitors will beat me to it,” Dumbledore continues. “I will request that all students stay on school grounds, for their own safety. Anyone caught violating that rule will be restricted to the interior of the castle unless engaged in outdoor lessons under staff supervision. Nizar, I will not yet announce a cancellation of Hogsmeade weekends. Please let me know if or when the village can be safeguarded.
for them.”

Nizar inclines his head. “I will.” It’s the second thing he intends to do, but tomorrow. After sleep.

He hopes he can sleep. He doesn’t think any of them will find easy rest, not after a potential twenty-three Death Eaters were freed from Azkaban—and among them some of the worst examples of humanity. He rather looks forward to meeting Bellatrix Lestrange, if only to kill her immediately.

Nizar bites his lip as he follows the others as they all abandon the staff room for the dubious peace of their private quarters. He is allowed to hope that the number of Death Eaters is twenty-two, not twenty-three. He can hope that Victoria Bluebell had ample opportunity to realize where the life of a Death Eater would lead her.

Then he feels a flush of impotent anger. Even if Victoria realizes it, Voldemort would kill her for leaving his side. No matter what, she’s trapped, and she is probably quite aware of it.

He knows it is not his fault that Voldemort is still alive. It is not his doing that Voldemort has not yet been slain.

He still feels the itch and sting of unwanted guilt. He is Protectoris, Merlin’s successor as Britain’s war mage, and he has not yet stopped one of this isle’s greatest enemies.

“How can you think about this at a time like this?” Severus asks, irritation in his tone. “Are you going to sleep?”

“Stop thinking so fucking much. We are meant to be attempting to sleep before breakfast,” Severus reminds him. Nizar glances up to realize that he followed Severus all the way to Severus’s dungeon quarters and didn’t take in a bit of the journey.

“Are you going to sleep?” Nizar asks.

“I am intelligent enough to know when to imbibe in Dreamless Sleep, even if the dose is one-quarter strength,” Severus replies, irritated. “Will you do the same?”

“The trouble with chronic insomnia is that it takes a full dose of something like that to work, and I do not wish to be that insensible. No, truly, I am not being an idiotic Gryffindor,” Nizar says in response to Severus’s raised eyebrow. “If an enemy approaches this castle, we still only have three of the four Heads of House holding their Seats. Without all four, I need to be fully cognizant of any threat to the school. If I don’t sleep in the meantime, then so be it.”

“If Pomona finally sees sense and accepts the Northern Seat, will that change? Will you be able to drug yourself into a stupor if your health requires it?” Severus asks in utter seriousness.

Nizar nods. “I could do so before, when the Founders held all four corners of Hogewáþ’s magic. She’s strongest at those times. The wards are strongest. If she truly had need of me beyond their skill, the castle would wake me—whether I wanted to be awake or not.”

Severus looks discomfited. “Will the castle do that to us? Those who hold the Seats?”

“You would have to ask Salazar that.” Nizar glances down at his clothes, which suddenly feel too heavy and too restrictive for the late hour. “I’m getting ready for bed, even if it’s a useless effort. Join me?”

“As long as you recall that it’s a Sunday evening, and I much prefer to face a Monday from the dungeons instead of your tower.”

That is an easy concession to make. He likes the occasional peace of Severus’s darkened chamber, even if it is not to his complete preference. He suspects that somewhere deep down, it isn’t even
completely to Severus’s preference, or he would not sleep in Nizar’s quarters nearly as often as he does.

As promised, Severus does take the quarter-dose of Dreamless Sleep, and is out almost immediately. Nizar feels a stab of envy and does his best to ignore it. Even without a potion, Severus can find sleep easily when he needs to. It’s a trick Nizar never learned. For that matter, neither did Godric.

Nizar runs his hand through Severus’s hair, the other too deeply asleep to notice. When Severus is awake, or merely napping, he is careful to maintain a polite distance in the bed they share. When he is sleeping deeply, though, Severus clings with determination. Nizar does the same, of which Severus often mutters false complaints.

He is definitely not going to tell Severus that he has the same trait. Severus would find it embarrassing and speak of sleeping elsewhere. Nizar is really not in the mood to navigate any of their many personal difficulties regarding relationships right now. Instead, he maintains his silence as he sits on the bed in Severus’s dungeon bedroom. A single candle provides just enough light to turn every object in the room into new and intriguing shadowy shapes on the wall.

Nizar still wants to kill someone who deserves it. Unfortunately, no other Death Eaters were available after dawn on Saturday to volunteer for the cause.

He is just giving thought to attempted waking meditation, what little he recalls of it from his visits to the East, when he feels something jarring on the edge of Hogwarts’ wards. He stills, his breathing slowing to a near halt, as he waits for that sensation to repeat itself.

It does, louder this time. Someone is hammering on the wards, but not to break them. They are knocking.

Maybe Nizar will get to kill someone, after all.

Nizar slips on the dressing gown over his pyjamas to avoid offending any of the elves, pulls on his boots, and then considers the location of the knocking as it happens again. He shakes his head; insistent arsehole with no imagination. That is the same location where he first met the noseless walking corpse in November.

He Apparates directly to the furthest edge of the wards in the Forbidden Forest, almost clear of the wood but still sheltered by its stretching branches. His eyes adjust to the change in light at once, revealing his guest.

In the clearing a few steps away stands Tom Marvolo Riddle, cloaked and masked. He is not holding his wand, which is intriguing. “Greetings, Uncle.” There is not even a hint of a slur in Voldemort’s voice.

Nizar tilts his head, studying Voldemort. He still wears the same black robe, retains the appearance of a walking corpse, and has not yet rediscovered the usefulness of shoes. The red iron mask Narcissa told him of covers nearly half of Voldemort’s face, though not his eyes or forehead. It looks to be sealed to Voldemort’s skin, covering part of his mouth, jaw, cheek, and stretching up to rest next to his ear. His eyes, which have been red on all other occasions, are a watery, red-edged blue that speaks of illness.

“I like the mask,” Nizar decides to comment. “How is your Parseltongue fairing now that there is a massive hole in your face?”

Voldemort lips pull to the right in a smile, the rest of the expression hidden by the mask. “I do quite
well, Uncle,” he hisses, proving that he can still speak with serpents. It’s a bit messy to Nizar’s ears, but understandable. “I could kill you where you stand, you know.”

“No, you could not.” Nizar returns to speaking English. “You are outside the wards of Hogwarts. They are stronger now than when we first met, and I stand within them. They would repel whatever spell you cast—and you are perfectly aware of that, aren’t you?”

Voldemort nods. “I merely wished to speak to you. Given that you are called Hogwarts’ Protector, I knew it would be you who would react to my touch upon her wards.”

“You don’t want to speak to me. You want to bargain with me.” Nizar crosses his arms, letting his fingertips rest on the wand hidden in his sleeve. “Given that you started a war yestereve, I am not much inclined to listen to your terms.”

“I think otherwise,” Voldemort counters smoothly. “You are a Slytherin, and thus you are… practical. My war has waited a long time, Uncle. I am ready to conquer this isle, and even you will not be able to stop me. Every step I take will bring death to those who oppose me.”

Nizar has heard those sorts of claims before. “Get to the point.”

Voldemort’s eyes flash in irritation. Good. “I might be willing to…mitigate those losses. To show mercy. I would not alter my goal of conquering and controlling this isle, of course, but perhaps the bloodshed can be lessened.”

“And what would you ask for in return for that sort of concession?”

Voldemort smiles. “I want Harry Potter.”

Nizar sighs and glances up at the stars. “Of course you do. Why?”

“By prophecy, I was meant to destroy him. While he remains alive, he is my only weakness. I will not be weak, Uncle. Give me Harry Potter, and there will be war, but there will not be slaughter. I will even vow it upon my magic.”

Nizar raises both eyebrows, surprised. Voldemort must have learned something of politics between his last war and this new one, if he recognizes the need for his victims to understand their new lord’s mercy. “You wish for me to hand over an innocent child in order to spare others.”

“It’s a trivial thing compared to all the magical lives in Britain, is it not?” Voldemort looks coaxing, convincing—as if he is attempting to show that he has a heart in his corpse breast, after all.

“I claimed and raised three children as my own, Tom,” Nizar whispers, somewhere between bemused and infuriated. “I will stop your slaughter, but not by bargaining with the life of an innocent.” Then he smiles. “Even if I wished to do so, I could not grant you what you wish for. Harry Potter is not available.”

Voldemort scowls, his eyes finally flashing that familiar red. “What do you mean?”

“You will only see Harry Potter again when it is time for your death.” Nizar hesitates when he feels a shiver of premonition dance up his spine. Fuck, but he wasn’t trying to be literal!

“If you place Harry Potter before me, he will die,” Voldemort says with cold finality.

“Maybe,” Nizar allows. The newest prophecy from Sibyl Trelawney does bother him, a bit, even with the many ways for prophecy to be interpreted. He still has no intention upon dying. “But he will
not be alone when that time comes.”

Voldemort shakes his head. “His life for a multitude is nothing, Uncle. Are you certain you will not see reason?”

“That is not reason. That is an act of evil.” There is fury in Nizar’s breast, the same swell of anger he feels when he is reminded of the utter helplessness he faced in losing Brice and Elfric. “You will not have your trade.”

Voldemort inclines his head. “A pity. You will lose this war.”

“That is doubtful. The only war in which I ever participated in that was lost was not of my doing. That was the English throne’s own fucking fault for not listening to me.”

“Of course.” Voldemort is still attempting to mock him, but Nizar doesn’t care. He’s played this game too often, with too many, and he’s tired. He just wants to get this over with, to pry at Voldemort until he drops useful clues or leaves in a temperamental hiss. “Then I will ask for a…a lesser trade. My mercy will not be as great, but perhaps we can still discuss terms.”

“Terms.” Nizar’s fingertips caress the glyphs on his wand. “And they are?”

Voldemort’s eyes are now a faint red glow in the darkness. “Is it true that you can retrieve a globe of prophecy from the Department of Mysteries?”

“And how did you discover that information?” Nizar asks, pretending a shock he doesn’t feel. Thank you, Narcissa.

“I have my ways,” Voldemort replies in an airy tone. “Is it true?”

“I do not lie when the truth is more interesting,” Nizar says. If Voldemort never notices that his answer is not really an answer at all, then all the better.

“Very well. If you retrieve the prophecy that refers to myself and Harry Potter, and give it to me, I will not only limit the bloodshed of this war, I will ask my Death Eaters to show mercy to your…partner.”

Nizar allows himself a wide grin. “Which prophecy?”

Voldemort’s mocking arrogance drops away like a falling stone. His lips thin; his eyes narrow. “What?”

“Which prophecy?” Nizar is, perhaps, enjoying this moment a bit too much. “There is more than one prophecy regarding yourself and the Chosen One, and both of those prophecies refer to your defeat.”

“More than one,” Voldemort breathes, the red glow of his eyes increasing until the blue is utterly washed away. It’s fascinating, and makes Nizar wonder if Voldemort’s family magic has nothing left to it but the color of blood. “Then I would ask for both.”

“And you’ll receive neither.” Nizar hardens his voice. “No concessions, Voldemort. No bargains. No assistance. We do not need your magnanimous generosity in order to defeat you, and we never have. You will lose, and you will die.”

Voldemort retrieves his wand, his hand curling around its white talon grip. “I will kill everyone that you love,” he hisses. “The fool masquerading as your dead brother. Severus. The Order. All of them. You will weep over their corpses, Uncle.”
Nizar snorts. “How many Horcruxes do you have left?”

The burst of green light from Voldemort’s wand is expected, but Nizar still flinches. His heart is pounding as he watches the bright fire of the Killing Curse spread out along the sheltering wards and then fade into nothing.

Voldemort is gone by the time the light has vanished, of course. Fucking irritating walking corpse.

The idea of Voldemort targeting Severus bothers him, but it is a threat unchanged. It has been this way from the start, and acting like it’s a new problem won’t help anything.

His heart still won’t stop pounding. Rage, frustration, and fear are all tangled up together in his breast.

It’s his own words that haunt him: *People die in wars. I’ve seen it, time and time again.*

When Nizar returns to Severus’s quarters, Severus is sitting on his sofa, wrapped in a black dressing gown and regarding the fireplace. He looks up at Nizar at once. “Where have you been?”

Nizar peels off his dressing gown, too warm after being out of doors, and then sits beside Severus. “Voldemort wanted to chat. I really want to stab something.”

Severus grimaces. “The wards beyond the edge of the Forest?”

Nizar nods in confirmation, smiling when a tea tray is delivered by an elf wearing a silver-edged dress. “He chose the place where I first met him. I stayed inside the bloody wards.”

Severus waits until the elf departs. “What did he want?”

“He offered us less bloodshed in this war if I would give him Harry Potter.”

Severus blinks once and then looks at him. “Thank you for not leaping into his arms.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Seriously, I am not in a hurry to die. I’m also not inclined to let him win in any form or fashion. I told him that giving him Harry Potter isn’t even a bloody option!”

“He must have taken that well.”

“Cast the Killing Curse at me,” Nizar says with an absent shrug. “The wards dealt with it.”

Severus reaches out and grips Nizar’s leg. “Please do not repeat that.”

Nizar sighs and leans against Severus. “I’m not much fond of having the Killing Curse flung at my face. Whenever possible, that will not be repeated.”

“That is the best assurance I will ever gain, isn’t it?” Severus asks.

“That is better than so many terrible alternatives,” Nizar agrees, unsure if he wants to voice the next part. In the end, he decides honesty is the wiser option. “He was willing to offer to spare you, pledging it on his magic, if I were to somehow become capable of turning myself over to him on my own behalf.” Nizar snorts. “That’s not happening, but it makes me believe that he will target you above all others in revenge—possibly even over Dumbledore, and he has hated our ludicrous Headmaster for a very long time.”

“If he still intends to gain the prophecy, then that is an unchanged threat, Nizar,” Severus reminds him. His voice is neither sour nor gentle, but a studious, careful neutral. “Your reassurance in this
matter is that he would, at first, desire for me to remain alive.”

“I know.” Nizar realizes he is turning the silver family ring on his left finger over and over again and makes himself stop, centering the crest below his knuckle so it faces properly outwards. “I had…a thought. An idea.”

“Nizar, Voldemort just tried to blast you in the face with the Killing Curse, and you choose now to be nervous?” Severus asks dryly.

“This is far more important, and if I word it wrong, then it fucks up things that I care about. I care not for that noseless walking corpse’s feelings!” Nizar retorts.

Severus turns his head, his gaze dark and unfathomable. “Tell me. I can withstand more frivolous nonsense than you might think me capable of.”

“Alice in Wonderland,” Nizar says in reminder. “I’ll be right back.” Before Severus can snarl about the book, he Apparates directly to his quarters upstairs.

The linen pouch is where he left it, sitting in the drawer of the nightstand that has become his side of the bed. The elves granted Severus the same addition, somehow finding a table made of the same sort of wood, cut in the same style as his bedposts. Nizar decided not to ask questions, thanked them, and called it a miracle.

Nizar Apparates back downstairs to find Severus waiting for him, scowling. “It’s only a book, Severus. I was thinking, perhaps, that I might reread it.”

“Why?” Severus asks in disbelief.

“Luna is a mindful example of why one should always expect the unexpected. So is that book,” Nizar says, sitting back down on the sofa. “Do you remember Uriel’s ring?”

Severus, on the verge of arguing with him over Lewis Carrol, goes still. “Yes. Why?”

“Every ring given to one who is born to or joins the Deslizarse family is treated to a simple blood magic spell.” Nizar tries not to clench the linen pouch in his hand. He is already anxious; no need to advertise further. “If I alter this ring with your blood, and you wear it, then I would be able to locate you—no matter where Voldemort has taken you.”

Severus is silent for nearly two full minutes. “If I wore that ring, the students would make… assumptions. The bloody staff would, as well.”

“Thinking you wed or betrothed?” Nizar tries not to smile. The idea appeals to him, but he understands why Severus would rather eat hot coals than be so obvious. “Using the Invisibility Charm with it would not hinder its effectiveness, and would also serve to hide it from our allies as well as the enemy.”

“That is true,” Severus admits. “But there has to be something other than this. Something less symbolic.”

“You do not wear earrings or necklaces, not that I’ve ever noticed, and a necklace could be easily discovered. The Invisibility Charm does not make those braided chains cease to exist.”

“And the ring is thin enough to escape easy notice unless a Death Eater is trying to break my hand or remove my fingers.” Severus bows his head, resigned. “If I were to ever accept such a thing from you, Nizar, this is not the sort of situation that should bring it about!”
Nizar is heartened by the idea that Severus thinks so. That is fantastic progress, especially considering Severus’s panic attack during the ring’s initial discovery. “Severus. When it comes to something that might grant me the ability to save your life, I find it to be the most fitting of circumstances. However, we can put all of those complications aside for now, and think on them again after Voldemort is fucking dead.”

Severus presses his lips together, brow furrowed, before he finally nods. “Then yes. What do you need from me?”

“Prick your finger. One drop of blood onto the seal of the ring when I hold it out,” Nizar instructs. Severus is swift to do so, though he has to retrieve a knife from a drawer. He even chooses the correct finger by the old traditions, pricking the pad of his left middle finger.

Nizar captures the drop of blood with the seal of the ring and then grips it tightly in his right hand. The flare of his magic is warm; silver sparks dance around his clenched fist. He wants this to be right. He wants this ring to belong to Severus. It should not be a constant reminder of a time when it was worn by another, though he is still grateful for his son-in-law’s gift.

He uncurls his hand and holds it out to Severus. The ring is gleaming as if newly minted, without any hint of the blood that stained its surface. When Severus gives it a wary look, Nizar smiles in encouragement. “If you take it from me and place it on your finger yourself, it means it is simply yours. If I were to place it on your finger, it would definitely be that symbology you currently wish to avoid.”

“I see.” Severus picks up the ring with no further hesitation, but he does take the time to examine it. “The seal has changed.”

“Yes.”

“It looks exactly like yours.” Severus gives him an accusing look. “Why did you do that?”

“Because this gift to you should not be a ring that belonged to another. It should be yours. When you put on that ring, it will be the first time that ring has ever been worn.”

Severus looks shocked. “You used my blood to…”

“To make it yours. And to be capable of finding you with it, if need be,” Nizar says cheerfully. Then he cracks his jaw on an unexpected yawn. Perhaps after taunting Voldemort and performing a strong bit of magic, he’ll be able to sleep.

Severus dithers far too long for Nizar’s patience. “Nizar—”

“Put on the fucking ring or I’m hexing you before bed,” Nizar snaps. “It won’t bite you, Severus. That would be my job.”

Severus glares at him and then shoves the ring onto his left middle finger. His eyes widen at once. “What is that?”

“The magic within the ring adjusting itself and learning the sense of you. Did I not warn you it would do that?” Nizar asks innocently.

Severus growls at him. “It must have slipped your mind.”

“Imagine that. It likes you, by the way,” Nizar adds.
“How can you tell?” Severus asks, frowning.

“Well, you’re not screaming and trying to pry it off, so that is always an excellent sign.” Nizar laughs aloud when Severus uses wandless magic to fling a pillow into his face. “I am mostly joking about that!”

When he puts the pillow back and turns around, Severus is studying the ring, a pensive expression on his face. “You can hide it whenever you like,” Nizar assures him. “I won’t be offended.” Sad, perhaps, but he understands Severus’s reluctance. He promised this courtship would happen at a pace Severus could tolerate, and Nizar stands by his word.

Severus shakes his head. “No. Not tonight. I…tomorrow. Tomorrow is soon enough. Shall we return to bed, or do you wish to go out and taunt another Dark Lord?”

“I’m all out of Dark Lords to taunt.” Nizar stands up and grasps Severus’s hands until he stands, as well. “After this war is over, would you like to travel somewhere this summer?”

Severus blinks a few times at the abrupt shift in conversation. “I—I am probably not opposed. Unaccustomed to such an idea, but not unopposed, especially with the implication that the war will have ended by terms’ end. Why?”

“It used to be a tradition of ours. Whenever the students went home to be with their families, we would travel. I’d like to do that again.” Nizar grins. “Besides, you said you might show me a rocket launch. That requires travel.”

Severus bites back a smile and then tugs on Nizar’s hand, leading them back to the bedroom. “That it does.”
Hermione Granger comes back to Hogwarts late enough on Sunday evening that she doesn’t even get to speak to anyone before falling into bed for sleep. Her parents are fine, the house is repairable, her parents are fine—she’s told herself that quite a bit today. She’s looking forward to the relative normalcy of school, even if it is school with a war happening in the background.

Granted, her teacher, future Master for Defence, future sort-of-employer for classroom assistance, and time-traveling best friend is going to be right in the middle of it, as usual. War won’t be a background happenstance so much as something she keeps tripping over.

Nizar warned her with a note delivered by a sock-clad Dobby that Monday’s front page news was meant to be devoted to Britain’s four new war mages, and to expect interesting responses from her tablemates. He then wouldn’t tell her who the new war mages were, but at least one of them is definitely a Gryffindor if he is handing out that sort of warning.

It is thus a terrible blow, and gut-churning, sudden terror to unroll the *Daily Prophet* and discover that Voldemort used the cover of the Ides of March raids to completely empty Azkaban. All of the Death Eaters still alive from the first war, like John Avery Senior, Bellatrix Lestrange, the Lestrange brothers, John’s wife Martha Rosier-Avery, Heliotrope Rothschild, Hillaria Bole, Augustus Rookwood, and Alfred Prewett—Great-Aunt Muriel’s younger brother and Mafalda Prewett’s grandfather—are free to terrorize Britain. There are even three names related to current Gryffindors: Redgrave Hooper, Charles Frobisher, and Andrew McLaggen.

God, this means that *that woman*, Umbridge, is free. Hermione might seethe over that bit of injustice more than is necessarily healthy.

Then she looks up and sees that Neville is the color of stale cheese. “Are you all right?”

Neville shakes his head. “Not—not really. I…my parents. The Lestranges are the ones who…”

Hermione makes a sympathetic noise and reaches out to pat his arm. She knows that Neville grew up with only his Gran and an Uncle Algie (who sounded like a complete git), but he never discusses his parents. Ever. “I’m so sorry. I’m sure your Gran will be safe.”

“Not really her I’m worried about,” Neville murmurs, but he does manage to smile back at her. “It’ll be okay, Hermione. As well as, anyway.”
Hermione nods and glances back down at the paper, aware of a near-complete hush in the Great Hall as everyone reads their various subscriptions. It’s a relief to discover that the fifteen Death Eaters apprehended during the Ides raids are still incarcerated in Ministry holding cells. The others, the recent arrests, however…

She glances up and seeks out Draco at the Slytherin table. He is staring down at his copy of the Prophet, nearly as white-faced as Neville—and his father was already free of Azkaban. She wonders who else among the freed Death Eaters might be eliciting that reaction.

The Death Eaters incarcerated during the first war are joined by those recently arrested: Victor Crabbe, Vincent’s father; Richard Jugson, tiny Vanity’s father; Walden Macnair, Xavier’s father; Theodore Nott Senior, Theo’s father; Antonin Dolohov, young Slytherin Seraphina’s uncle; Impatience Selwyn, who is a suspected Death Eater only, but helped Marked student Victoria Bluebell with her poisoning attempt of Professor Snape; Albert Runcorn, who was up on charges of suspect repeat counts of paedophilia along with trying to procure the sexual services of a minor; and fucking blasted Peter Pettigrew.

The fact that Voldemort took everyone in Azkaban, whether they wished to leave or not, is chilling.

Hermione knows her history. Voldemort likes Inferi. He made a lot of them during the last war.

She listens attentively as Professor Dumbledore talks about the escaped Death Eaters, and the new rules regarding the school grounds. He mentions what the Prophet disregarded—that the Dementors are on the loose. Professor Salazar stands up long enough to assure everyone that he has made absolutely certain that no Dementor can breach Hogwarts’ wards, but he can’t guarantee that same safety if someone is fool enough to leave school grounds.

Nothing is mentioned of Hogsmeade. Hermione wonders if that is because no decision has been made yet, or if everyone is optimistically hoping Voldemort will be dead before the next Hogsmeade weekend.

After breakfast, Hermione does what ethics and her Prefect badge demand of her: she visits with every student who is not a known baby Death Eater. She needs to know if they have the support of their Housemates, or if there is anything particular she can do. Ron, without any prompting at all, is doing the same—but he’s the one with the current patience to go ask the same of the bloody baby Death Eaters, too.

Hermione would kiss him for that if it wouldn’t make things odd.

Then she is at complete loose ends. With classes canceled until Wednesday morning, Hermione has nothing else to do except…be with her friends. She has those now. Friends.

Friends who have Death Eaters in their families. Friends who are now upset or in danger.

Hermione chews on her lip before making a decision. She goes to find Draco, who is sitting on an upper riser of the Grand Stair, arms resting across his knees. “Hello.”

“Hello, Hermione.” Draco tilts his head at the stone next to him. “I’m not much for company right now, I’m afraid, but you may join me if you like.”

“I didn’t come here for scintillating company, you ninny. I came to be here with you,” Hermione says tartly. “I care about you, and it’s not every day that a bunch of murderous Death Eaters escape from the mostly-inescapable Wizarding prison of Britain to join him as well as your bigoted arse of a father.”
Draco snorts at that. “Mostly inescapable. That’s accurate enough.”

“I notice you didn’t argue with my assessment of your father’s character,” Hermione says.

“I don’t argue with facts. Usually.” Draco’s brow furrows before he reaches into his jacket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “He must have been rushed. He didn’t even attempt to put a proper seal on it.”

Hermione stares at the paper. “He—your father wrote you a letter?”

“Mm.” Draco doesn’t sound overly concerned.

“Draco, this is serious!” Hermione blurts out, appalled. “Have you told anyone?”

“Not yet. It’s personal, Hermione!” Draco says in exasperation. “It’s—” He visibly bites off whatever else he was going to say and tries again. “I suppose it’s cultural. Yes, I will tell someone, most likely Professor Snape, but I am allowed to dwell on its contents before I do so.”

“Oh.” Hermione hesitates. “Is it that bad?”

Draco wiggles the letter he’s still holding. “You have my permission to read it for yourself.”

She isn’t certain she wants to, but curiosity wins out. It usually does.

To my Dearest Son and Heir to the Malfoy Family,

I congratulate you on the status you have attained through Britain’s royal family. Such a position will serve you well in regards to social success in Wizarding Britain. Being the true Lord of Wiltshire will place you above the lesser sorts who populate the Wizengamot when it comes time for you to take my seat among that illustrious body. You will, of course, remember that our family and our allegiance to the Dark Lord comes before any vows you might have given to a mere Muggle ruler.

Hermione blinks a few times and glances at Draco. “Your father really doesn’t understand how magical titles work, does he?” Draco smiles a little and shakes his head.

I know that you currently disagree with the path I have chosen for our family, but rest assured that I do so for the best of reasons. I hope that, as this new war progresses, you find the wisdom to see our world for what it truly is. I have faith that you will come to stand at my side as we reclaim the true rights that Pure-blooded Wizards have been denied for too long.

“What ‘true rights?’”

Draco snorts. “He means the bit about Pure-bloods being so above everyone else that they can literally do whatever they want and not even the Wizengamot would be able to speak against them.”

“That…” Hermione wrinkles her nose. “That’s not only rubbish, that’s ludicrous.”

“I’m aware of that, yes.”
Continue to do well in your studies. I expect to hear that you have returned to spending your time with proper Wizards and Witches. No matter your personal feelings, know that Nizar Slytherin is a heretic who is not to be trusted. This false Salazar Slytherin is proof enough of his deceit. You are intelligent enough to find this truth for yourself.

I look forward to seeing you again, Draco. Your mother still stands by my side. I have utmost confidence that we will soon be a family again.

Your Loving Father,

Lucius Abraxus Malfoy

Hermione regards the closing of the letter. “He never usually calls himself ‘your loving father’ in his correspondence, does he?”

Draco takes the letter back from her and folds it up again before tucking it away in his jacket. “No. He was always far more formal. This is my father’s attempt at manipulating me—and a poor attempt, at that.”

“Does he think you’re that daft?” Hermione asks.

“Hermione, he has paid so little attention to me that I doubt he recalls anything of my intelligence at all,” Draco replies, his shoulders hunching. “I wish he’d remained silent. Getting that letter and reading that nonsense makes it worse. I know he’s a terrible father, but some days I still hope—”

Hermione does what Draco had done for her in Madam Zhi’s tea parlor when things began to feel too fraught and tense. She leans over and kisses him until he’s distracted from dwelling on Lucius bloody Malfoy.

* * * *

Nizar keeps an eye on the students as Monday morning progresses. He dislikes what he sees. Some of them are brave enough—desperate enough—to seek out their Heads of House to talk about the raids. Most of them are not. He sees inter-House support among the student body, which is good, but there are far too many pinched expressions and pale faces. This isn’t something they were meant to deal with on their own—and it shouldn’t be.

If anything was missing from Dumbledore’s breakfast speech, it was mention of the staff being available for the students to speak with. Perhaps Dumbledore thought it an obvious thing—or perhaps, given the way Dumbledore handled Jalaf’s unfortunate and terrible rampage through the school, he didn’t think on it at all.

At lunch, Nizar waits until everyone is seated before he stands up and calls for their attention. “I know you lot don’t have classes today or tomorrow, but a lack of classes means that we’re at loose ends, too. Therefore, I am going to be in my classroom at my normal times for the rest of this day,
and tomorrow as well. If you’re truly bored and wish to discuss Defence, or practicals, or fling desks at each other in supervised circumstances, I’ll be there. I have it on good authority that several other staff members will be doing the same.”

When he sits down, Severus looks mutinous while Salazar just seems amused. “That was well-played, little brother,” he hisses in Parseltongue. “You challenged our charming Headmaster’s lack of decency in this matter while not appearing to challenge him at all.”

“I shouldn’t have had to say those words at all,” Nizar grouses. “Besides, the right sort of people will notice, Sal.”

“Oh, I know. And I’m glad for it.”

“Some of us do not appreciate the extra work you may have just granted us,” Severus mutters under his breath.

Nizar frowns. “The task of seeing to our students’ well-being? I’m terribly sorry. It must have slipped my mind that you loathe your students and would sooner set yourself on fire than converse with them in a classroom setting.”

“I have an office for that!” Severus retorts.

“You do, yes.” Nizar stares down at the food on his plate in consternation. The elves seem to have decided to distract everyone from their current troubles by supplying something entirely foreign. He hopes it isn’t toxic. “But you are a Slytherin, Head of House to a number of other Slytherins. How many of us do you think would be comfortable meeting with someone in close quarters right now?”

Severus narrows his eyes. “My office is large enough, but I see your point. It can become a close space in the right circumstances.”

“And these certainly are the right circumstances,” Salazar murmurs. His eyes are on the rest of the staff table, where the other faculty are quietly discussing if they are going to follow Nizar’s example, or if they find it lunacy and will instead be hiding in their offices or their quarters. Dumbledore will most certainly be in his office, safe under his claim of always being available…as long as he has deigned to give you Galfridus’s current password.

Nizar taught all of the students who would listen to cheat and use the scratching method to gain entry to the Headmaster’s Tower. He also cautioned them not to go by themselves, and to make certain their companion has Mind Magic training. The Slytherins understood his instructions at once. The others just seemed bewildered by the necessity, but agreed to go along with it—humoring him, Nizar thinks. He doesn’t care as long as they do as asked.

He also wants to know what the hell happened to Joyous’s article on the four new war mages. Fortunately, he receives that answer by means of her overly affectionate and imported screech owl just after lunch.

Nizar,

I am sorry for the delay, but it was not my doing. Politics got in the way, but in this case I think they were sensible about it. The public needs to know all it can about the war, especially in regards to events like Azkaban. As far as I am aware, Tuesday’s news will still be concerning itself with updates regarding this past Friday’s events.
Wednesday’s article is of my choosing, and I believe its time has come.

Thursday will be again devoted to large scale news of the Wizarding world. The article on the war mages will thus be published on Friday, at a time when I think all of us will need that breath of fresh air—such as it is, anyway.

Your ally in information and subterfuge for public edification,

Joyous Spencer

Nizar isn’t surprised when his N.E.W.T. students turn up Monday afternoon in the normal sixth-year’s slot of time. He had a few students of differing years and Houses stop by briefly during that first hour, but none seemed to know yet what to say. He doesn’t mind; they have time to contemplate things before Tuesday grants them another opportunity.

His older students are a different matter entirely. “Plotting again, are we?”

“I’m certain that some of them don’t know when to stop,” Hermione says of the Weasley twins. Fred and George grin, proud to own up to their talents.

“We were discussing what we learned with the other N.E.W.T. students, thinking we could all use the distraction,” Miss Johnson explains.

“And a few others,” Jordan adds, tilting his head in the direction of several other students that wandered in behind them, which adds Neville Longbottom, Draco Malfoy, Ginevra Weasley, Millicent Bulstrode, and Adele Greenwood to his present group of eleven seventh-years and eight sixth-years.

Nizar considers them all, seeing an interesting mix of grim determination and healthy curiosity. “All right. I’ll bite. What did you lot have in mind?”

“Broom-making,” Miss Spinnet says, making grabby-hand motions while grinning maniacally. “You said you knew how to do it. We want to learn.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow and glances at Longbottom. “I thought you didn’t like flying.”

Longbottom’s cheeks take on a faint pink hue. “I’ve never actually owned my own broom, and Cho says a broom customized to the rider is always going to behave better than just any old broom someone hands you. The school brooms hate me, so I thought maybe it was worth trying.”

“The first step might be boring,” Nizar warns them.

“Yes, but it’s a step!” Miss Weasley declares in excitement. “Dull is fine as long as it leads to broom-making!”

Nizar smiles. “All right, then. I hope you brought the means to take notes, because the first thing you’ll need to learn is quite a bit of wood lore.”

Twenty-four students scramble for both seats and supplies. “We’re listening!” Miss Parangyo announces, sounding almost as gleeful as Miss Weasley. Nizar wonders how many of these students would be flying on the pitch if there were more options than a limited set of Quidditch games.
“The first thing you should know is that every wood in existence will grant you different properties for flight, and not all of them are suited for it,” Nizar says. “For example, lindenwood is a great wood for flight, but it’s exceptionally fragile. You have to bind it to another wood to create a lindenwood broomstick, or it will shatter the first time you fly it. You can also combine one wood with another to gain properties of flight in a wood that otherwise would plummet like a brick, but that can be quite a bit of trial-and-error before you find the balance between them. I suggest not experimenting with wood that doesn’t like flight for your very first broom unless you are a masochist.”

“That does not sound like our professor of Defence at all,” Gupta says with an absolute lack of sincerity.

“Not at all,” George agrees. “What did you build for your first broom, Professor?”

“Give me a moment, and I’ll show you. Don’t set the classroom on fire while I’m gone,” Nizar instructs, and Apparates to his quarters amid protests of innocence—some more convincing than others. He retrieves his original broom as well as the second broom that Galiena stored away in the applewood chest and returns to the classroom. Fortunately, nothing is on fire, though the Weasley twins are pointedly not looking at each other, and part of the ceiling is green.

“I don’t even want to know,” Nizar drawls. He places the smaller broomstick on the desk and then holds up his. “Seventh-years who were present for defensive flight practicals should recognize this. It’s the first broom I built, and I didn’t feel the need to replace it because it was excellent work.”

“A prodigy at broom-building, then?” Hermione asks, a quirk of a smile on her face that makes Nizar suspicious.

“Not at all. I was just paranoid that I’d muck it up, and I didn’t look forward to the idea of trying again. I preferred to get it right the first time—and I was fortunate enough to do so. It helped to have an excellent teacher. Salazar’s first wife, Orellana, was an elemental Wood Speaker. She taught me what I am about to teach you.”

The students all perk up, a more somber air among them. This group enjoys hearing about the Founders just as much as they recognize that it can be a sensitive subject. “The broomstick itself is made of black elder,” Nizar continues. “I know you’re all aware of the ridiculous lore about elder wands, but when it comes to brooms, the wood has great physical and magical strength, has its own natural intuition for movement and transition from one space to the next, and is strongly associated with the magical element of Air.”

“And those are birch and hazel twigs both,” Draco notes, pointing at the broom’s twigs with his quill. “Like a Firebolt, though they usually only use one or the other.”

“You built a Firebolt before a Firebolt existed.” Fred grins. “That’s wicked.”

“They should really use both twigs,” Nizar says. “Hazel wood in a broom add qualities of excellent navigation as well as quick turns in the air. Birch will grant you extra magical power and speed for quick upward flight.”


“Goblins, like many Green Folk, dislike iron. They can touch it without pain, but it bothers them.” Nizar rests his broom against the desk. “Yet the Ministry, and certain broom-making companies in particular, force them to use it by contract. In the meantime, silver is a better conductor of magic, will respond more quickly to a broom’s rider in regards to braking, and it doesn’t anger a goblin if you
ask for it to be made. Might need to word your contract carefully so they don’t make off with your broom the moment you put the foot-grips on it, but that is another issue entirely.”

“Different shape to it,” Miss Weasley says of his broom. “Was that a standard at the time?”

“No. If you’re going to make a broom, customize it to fit yourself, not some ridiculous standard. I made this broom to fit the height I grew to, rather than what might suit a child, as I didn’t fancy flying about with my knees lodged against my chin.” There is laughter of agreement at that, especially from the taller students.

Nizar picks up the smaller broom. “I made this for my daughter when she decided she was ready to learn to fly.” That isn’t quite accurate, but he can’t exactly say who it was originally meant for without creating far too many problems. “It was thus carved to suit a woman in regards to the height and placement of the seat as well as the foot-grips. However, there is a difference. When I built my broom, I already knew how to fly. She did not, and she was flight-shy. The broomstick is a combination of cedar and walnut, and yes, it really was a masochistic task to get those two woods to bond together without screaming in frustration. Why would I use cedar?”

It takes a moment before his students catch up. Miss Bulstrode is the first to raise her hand. “It’s an Earth-element sort of wood. Wouldn’t that result in the plummeting brick problem?”

“Not if its other aspect is stability and longevity, tied to the walnut, which has what traits?”

Gupta shrugs and raises his hand. “It’s fairly strong. Not certain of it’s magical qualities, though.”

“Protection,” Hermione says, gazing at the broom thoughtfully. “You built a broom for a beginner, so its flight is always going to be slower than standard. Sedate, easy to handle but it won’t zip about on a turn. Right?”

“And the apple twigs—that is apple, right?” Miss Greenwood asks. Nizar nods in confirmation. “Applewood is a magical enhancer. It would strengthen the intent of the other two woods, but also give the flier an instinctive nudge on how to fly the broom.”

“Excellent. You already know far more than you realized on how to build a broom simply by paying attention in class,” Nizar says, pleased. “Please note that staining the wood of your broom will not affect the magic, so that is an optional part of this process, but before the broom comes together, you must properly strip the bark and treat the wood with oil and beeswax. Losing a broom to dry rot would be ridiculous.”

Nizar keeps speaking, sitting on his desk and prattling on about the types of charms it takes to turn a branch of wood into a broom. He lectures them on patience possibly more than necessary, but the reminder that a sloppy-looking broom won’t win them any points does help the lesson stick. Then comes the recognition that they all know the wrong fucking incantation for the Unbreakable Charm. He mutters under his breath and teaches them the correct term, Infragilis, and explains the difference in results between the old word and the new.

“It won’t break? Never at all?” Miss Fawcett asks in disbelief.

“Under normal circumstances? No. However, if, say, the end of your broom is struck by a strong magical casting…” Nizar smiles. “Those are not the original twigs for my broom. I literally got knocked out of the air during a battle. That was not a fun landing, at least not for them.”

“For them?” Miss Bhatia asks, biting her lip against a smile.

“Well, if they wanted me on the ground so badly, the least they could do is pad the landing so I
didn’t hurt myself,” Nizar says blandly. “Besides, they started it.”

“Can we continue this?” Miss Applebee asks when it starts to get on towards the dinner hour. “I mean, there is tomorrow of course, but…I’d like to build one.”

“So would I,” Miss Weasley says. “I certainly can’t afford to buy one.”

Nizar quietly waves goodbye to part of his free Friday. “Fridays after dinner. One hour a week, as long as nothing pressing has occurred and I am not needed elsewhere. I’ll oversee your broom-making, but please warn everyone that this class is set as-is. I’ve already begun the process, and I don’t think I’m going to have the chance to start over. Anyone who missed out on the opportunity will have to wait until you lot are done.”

“How long, do you think?” Draco asks.

“The end of April, perhaps, as long as we’re not inconvenienced,” Nizar decides after a moment. “That isn’t a set amount of time. It will be different for all of you, given that it is up to each of you to research and choose the woods you wish to use. I’ll speak to the goblins regarding silver foot-grips for your brooms, and supply it as a necessity of your education, so do not concern yourselves with the cost,” he adds, which means that several students, Weasleys included, visibly relax. “I used deer sinew to bind the twigs to my broom, but any material of sufficient width, flexibility, and strength will do the same. That is also up to you. Harvesting the wood you will do on your own time, though I will teach you how to do so—and yes, there is a specific method that I expect you to adhere to. Carving the wood, preparing your materials, binding it all together, casting the charms—perhaps you’ll be done in two weeks. Perhaps two months. I strongly suggest that you take your time and don’t rush it. You’ll be happier in the long term.”

“Thank you, Fearless Leader,” George says.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “You’re welcome, ingrate. Oh, and I did check the school rules. There is no ban regarding self-made brooms and Quidditch, so if your results meet your expectations, feel free to terrorize other Quidditch players with your newfound knowledge.”

* * * *

Their missing students all return in time for Monday evening’s dinner. Minerva quietly thinks it’s a bit soon for some of them, but at least they won’t have the perceived threat of early morning classes hanging over their heads on the morrow. She lets her eyes roam the four House tables, catching snippets of conversation. Much of it is stilted and uncomfortable, the attempts of students awkwardly attempting to comfort their Housemates and friends. Most of those affected by the Ides of March raids don’t seem to notice their friends’ discomfort. If they do, they choose not to mention it. Their minds are on far more important things—and in too many instances, those things are funerals.

She glances to her right, where three Slytherins have arranged themselves together, as if in House solidarity. Given that Slytherin suffered the most, both from attackers who were captured, attackers who were killed, and families who were attacked, she can’t say she blames them. Nizar has a book next to his plate and a cup of tea in his free hand, but Minerva knows he is paying almost no attention to the book. He is listening, much as she is, though he prefers to be subtle about it. Salazar has his head tilted, pretending to be reading that same book, but Minerva thinks his concern is the faculty, and their responses to both the raids and those returned.
Severus is scowling, but that is so typical it could easily be overlooked. Minerva knows that this
time, the scowl is warranted. Only Filius has no funerals to contend with among the students of his
House, and is dealing with a ridiculous amount of guilt that Ravenclaw, but for a few injuries, came
through the raids unscathed. Minerva told him to stop being ridiculous and start being grateful,
instead, as next time might bring about different results entirely.

At the conclusion of the meal, Minerva stands and announces that she will be in her office. It is
where she can usually be found just after the dinner hour, but this time she believes there are students
who might need the reminder. Whether they choose to accept the offer is up to them.

Her first guest is a surprise, and yet it really should not be. “What options are there for…for magical
students who can’t go to Hogwarts anymore?” Colin asks.

Minerva stares at him in consternation. When he knocked on the door to her office and asked to
speak with her, she expected many things, but not that. “Homeschooling, usually,” she answers
honestly. She thinks she might suspect what is happening when Colin winces and lowers his head.

“Anything…is there anything else, Professor?”

“No really, not without transferring to Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, or another magical school further
abroad,” Minerva says, keeping her voice brisk. Contrary to what many believe, she is quite aware of
her students’ emotional needs and hidden undercurrents of feeling. She learned that lesson the hard
way after failing to listen to Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, and Miss Granger’s frantic warnings
regarding the theft of the Philosopher’s Stone. However, she is also not fool enough to suddenly alter
her behavior. It puts too many of her Gryffindors on their guard. “Is there someone who is feeling the
need to transfer away from Hogwarts due to the current threat of You-Know-Who?”

Colin doesn’t lift his head. “I don’t deserve to be here,” he whispers. “It’s all my fault that they’re
dead.”

It is immediately on her tongue to insist, “That is ridiculous,” but she restrains the urge—barely. It’s a
very Scots thing to say, and very much the truth, but that would not convince a fourteen-year-old
boy. It especially would not convince a boy who has legitimate reason to believe so, given that his
name was attached to several key photographs published in three respective magical newspapers.
Instead, she says, “Please sit down, Mister Creevey.”

Colin shuffles his way forward and sits in one of her chairs before her desk, still not looking at her.
She regards him for a moment, recalling what she overheard during the dinner hour. “Have a biscuit,
Mister Creevey. I’m aware of your lacking appetite.”

That at least prompts him into protesting. “But Professor—”

“That was not a suggestion, Mister Creevey.”

Colin snaps his jaw shut, looking vaguely mutinous, before he gives in and takes a chocolate-topped
digestive. Minerva nods in approval; it’s an excellent choice for an ailing magician. “Thank you,
ma’am,” he mumbles.

“You’re welcome.” Minerva waits for him to eat the biscuit, eyes him sternly until he gulps and takes
another, and then speaks. “What was Mister Mohammad’s crime, then?”

Colin nearly chokes mid-bite. “What? What do you mean, Professor?”

“Well, I am attempting to use your own logic in this matter, Mister Creevey,” Minerva says. “You
say that you are at fault for the loss of your parents, and perhaps you might have a point were it not
for what you have overlooked. Mister Mohammad’s mother was attacked, and would have died in
her home were it not for timely intervention. Mx. Shelby’s parents were killed, and they most
certainly had not put their name out there in any fashion that would have gained a Death Eater’s
notice. The same can certainly be said for Mister Finch-Fletchley of Hufflepuff, whose only potential
notoriety in a Death Eater’s eyes was being quoted by Rita Skeeter during last year’s Triwizard
Tournament. Mister Thomas’s mother and absent father might have been targeted merely for Mister
Thomas’s sharing of a dorm with Mister Potter for four years, but otherwise, he also had not done
anything offensive—unless, of course, you consider being considered a Muggle-born Gryffindor to
be offensive.”

“But—Dean’s a Half-blood,” Colin says in complete bewilderment. Minerva thinks that an
improvement over unwarranted guilt.

“That is aside from the point, and I think you are quite aware of that, Colin.” Minerva hides a smile
when Colin is startled anew by the informality of his given name. “If your family was claimed to be
targeted because of a few skilled photographs, that is only a reprehensible Death Eater’s poor excuse.
Your parents were not killed for photographs, but because they gave birth to magical children—or
are you going to now fault yourself and Dennis for a coincidence that saw you both born with
magic? Because to do so would be to also blame your brother for their deaths, and I don’t think
you’re that sort, Mister Creevey.”

Colin shakes his head, wide-eyed. “No, ma’am. But—”

“Colin.” Minerva nearly tries to adjust spectacles she hasn’t worn in months, a nervous habit that
Salazar often teases that she should be glad to be free of. “Their deaths were not your fault. Nothing
that occurred the previous Friday evening was of your doing, and don’t you dare try to shoulder
blame that is rightfully placed on the shoulders of You-Know-Who. He started this war long before
you were born, Colin. Even if you and your brother had never come about, You-Know-Who would
have considered your parents to be beneath him, to be disposable victims on his whim. That is the
kind of man he is, and it is not the kind of young man that you are.”

“Er…ma’am,” Colin whispers. He doesn’t seem to know what else to say, but Minerva doesn’t
mind. Most of what she’s spoken of will take a few days, if not a few months, to sink in properly.

“And when you’re ready, I expect you to pick that camera right back up and resume using your skills
properly,” Minerva advises, nearly tart in tone. Given the expression of shock on his face, she thinks
it well-done. “Your parents would not see you put aside something that brings you happiness.
Neither would your brother.”

“Uh—yes, Professor,” Colin says, blinking like a stunned owl. “Is there, er, anything else?”

Minerva smiles. “You came to me, Mister Creevey. Is there anything else that you require from me
this evening?”

Colin bites his lip, takes another biscuit as if prodded by a wand to the backside, and stands up. “No,
Professor. Uhm. Thank you, Professor.”

Minerva gestures at her door. “Go on to Gryffindor Tower then, Mister Creevey. Make certain you
check on your brother before going to bed. There are no classes tomorrow, but I will be within my
classroom or my office if you need to speak to me.”

“Ohay.” Colin stands up and swallows. There is still such heartache and grief on his young face, but
at least he looks a bit less downtrodden than before. “Good night, Professor.”
“Good night, Mister Creevey.”

Minerva waits until he shuts the door behind him before she leans back in her chair, sighing. One student’s needs seen to, for now, but there are so many others who will need much the same.

Then she thinks about what Albus might have said in her place, had Colin Creevey spoken to him about those published photographs, and puts a bit of steel into her spine. She might not ever be the best sort to console a grieving student, but better that than a chess player who would turn another’s loss to his advantage.
Salazar had the experience to know it from quite the young age, but the long years only confirmed it: war is exhausting. It is not only the time spent fighting. From the moment the arrows or the spells are loosed, rest is never truly possible. He is always waiting for the next engagement with nerves singing on edge, healing from the previous one, damaged in mind, heart, and body but knowing there will never be enough time to recover before he tears open every wound anew.

“‘Slings and arrows of misfortune,’ indeed,” he murmurs under his breath, amused once more. For all that William Shakespeare never had to take up military arms, he understood the weariness it could cause. He understood the weariness of ill-spent life—and how to use it—in a way that Salazar has only ever before encountered in Myrddin, but at least Shakespeare wasn’t a bloody arsehole about it.

He is still startled when Nizar appears by Desplazarse in his quarters that evening, looking far more tense than the situation should merit. His brother has known of this war for literally the whole of his life, and it should hold no surprise that would give him new concern.

Nizar often found a bit of joy in proving Salazar wrong. Salazar does not believe that to be a concern tonight. “I need you to do something for me.”

“What is it, hermanito? Because if it’s to brew a draught, I know you are capable of doing such yourself,” Salazar replies.

“While I know you’re thrilled that I’m finally a Potions Master without needing to learn to keep plants alive—” Nizar breaks off in confusion. “You know, I think I finally understand why that is?”

Salazar frowns. “Which part? The thing you’re here to ask me of, or the plants?”

“The plants. They made that child be their house-elf—the Dursleys, idiota, do keep up,” Nizar adds before Salazar can ask. “I’ve seen the gardening work around their foul house. It’s too old to be recent work, which meant the child maintained it, which meant the child kept those plants alive—”

“Oh, I see. The moment you were freed from it being necessary to your well-being to be certain they thrived, you decided they all deserved to die,” Salazar says dryly.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “I don’t hate plants. I especially like the ones that help to keep me alive. I think it’s more the ability was never natural. If the child was using instinctive magic to make those plants thrive…”
“Magical exhaustion in the form of Herbology?” Salazar considers it. “I’ve encountered magical exhaustion specific to a type of magic before, but never for plants.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“No. I think you are entirely correct,” Salazar murmurs. “Was such incongruity bothering you, little brother?”

“No, actually, I wasn’t dwelling on it at all, but I can’t sleep. Those thoughts just sort of happen,” Nizar explains, waving one hand in the air in distraction.

That does explain why Salazar found himself dwelling on the exhaustion of war. He’d managed to forget that Nizar’s insomnia knows no limits when battles threaten at any moment. Neither did Godric’s. It made them quite the pair, and quite entertaining to listen to after days of fighting were done and still the two could not rest. The students often found it hilarious; even when they strayed into topics of blood and death, the ways in which Godric and Nizar spoke of such things had been comedic poetry, and the envy of more than a handful of bards.

“Tell me what it is you need. I’m to join the Lioness when she retires for the evening.” Salazar likes to spend time in her quarters when their schedules allow for it. Minerva’s home reminds her less that she is dating an ancient relic. She refuses to admit that his rooms are intimidating, but he knows that they are. Salazar doesn’t mind; for all that he is certain of his feelings, what they hold between their hearts is still new.

“Oh. Right.” Nizar drops down onto the sofa facing the window, preferring the paintings at his back rather than the windows. “I need you to scry upon Voldemort’s fate again.”

Salazar does not waste time. He Conjures the bowl from its shelf, and sudden desire brings forth water to fill it without need of his wand. “Why?”

“He came to see me—Voldemort. He came to the wards at the edge of the Forbidden Forest,” Nizar explains. “Late Sunday night, early Monday morning. I’m not certain when; I didn’t check the time.”

Salazar nods. Voldemort has always craved acknowledgement, the need to display his intelligence. It does not surprise him that he sought out Nizar’s opinion. “What did he wish to speak of?”

“Oh, he wanted me to give him Harry Potter in exchange for less bloodshed during his war. As if I would allow him the chance to cause so much suffering that an innocent would ever be worth the trade,” Nizar says in scathing disparagement. Salazar nods again, hoping that when Nizar chooses to share this information with Dumbledore’s Order that none are fool enough to suggest they consider doing exactly that. Aside from the fact that Nizar is disinclined to hand over himself, his brother would never condone the sacrifice of an innocent to assuage another’s fear and cowardice. Neither would Salazar. To do so is to forget the point of fighting against evil deeds in the first place.

“That isn’t what is bothering you.”

“No.” Nizar scowls. “I said to him that he wouldn’t see Harry Potter again until his death, and that is the problem. I mentioned his death, and I felt…” His brother clenches his jaw. “Premonition. Ice up the spine. Unpleasantness. I don’t know if he fucked up, or if it was just…I don’t know what it means. I’m not a master of Divination.”

Salazar stares at him. “You and your fucking temper, little brother. What possessed you to say such a thing?”

“If I knew that, I would know what it meant, and I would be leaving you to continue your courtship
in peace,” Nizar snaps. “Please do get on with it. I want to know what changed.”

“So do I.” Salazar takes a seat on the sofa next to his brother, placing the bowl onto the table. He concentrates for a moment on the clear water before tapping the edge of the bowl three times with his wand.

The ripples recede, the surface still as a mirror once more. Salazar finds himself baffled by his scrying for the first time in centuries. It is grey, but it is not the fog that hides the fate of the dead.

“What? What is it?” Nizar asks, leaning forward to peer into the bowl. “That isn’t mist.”

“No. It is not.” Salazar tilts his head and studies the surface of the water at all angles. No matter which way he peers at it, what he sees is solid grey. It’s as if paint suddenly filled this bowl instead of water. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Never?” Nizar ponders the water for a moment before he sticks his index finger directly into the bowl. When he draws back his hand, it is not clear water dripping from his finger, but that same grey, paint-like substance. “Nor that either, I imagine.”

Salazar almost wishes his brother had not done that. “No. What does it feel like?”

“Like mud without grit to it. Perhaps like a very fine clay deposit exposed to too much water.” Nizar considers it before sniffing the residue. “But it smells like nothing. Not even the mineral tang of water or scent of earth.”

“Please remove that from your hand. It’s making me nervous,” Salazar admits. Nizar glances at him, but uses a handkerchief retrieved from his robe pocket to wipe his hand clean. “And wash that afterwards. Scour it with pumice if you have any.”

“I was thinking of sticking my finger into a candle flame, myself. What?” Nizar asks when Salazar glares at him. “I’ve already stuck my entire hand into a burning hearth since I fell out of a painting. A candle is a bit mild in comparison.”

“Of course. Filky, darling, could you come here, please?” Salazar waits for the elf to appear, looking pleased to be summoned. “I need to ask you a question, and I’m concerned that you might find it distressful.”

Filky narrows her eyes. “Filky can decide for herself if a question is distressful, Professor Salazar.”

“All right.” Salazar hopes the elf forgives him. “When does Voldemort die?”

Filky opens her mouth, and then closes it. She blinks a few times, twitches her ears, and wriggles her fingers. The fragile chains in her ears make a chiming sound that seems to never end.

“Filky cannot say. Filky doesn’t know,” the elf says in wide-eyed bafflement. “It is not something an elf can see!”

“Thank you, Filky,” Nizar says while Salazar is still staring at her. “You may go. Please do not mention that to anyone else, unless it’s to confer with another elf—and ask them to do the same. This should not be discussed.”

Filky nods and Vanishes. Salazar shakes off lingering surprise and tries to Banish the contents of the bowl.

It won’t go.
“Oh, now that is even more auspicious.” Nizar considers the grey liquid before drawing a green-edged glyph in the air over the bowl. The liquid catches fire, burning with silver light, until the bowl is empty and clean once more. “I’m not certain if I don’t know is better or worse than Never.”

“I’m not much fond of either option, myself.” Salazar inspects the bowl, but feels no ill residue. He hopes that whatever happened does not affect it; this bowl is far older than he is, a literal treasure of his family so ancient that none could recall when it came into their hands.

“No, I’m decided. I much preferred the answer of Never,” Nizar whispers.

Salazar looks over to find that Nizar has gone pale. “What? Why in the names of all the gods would that be an improvement?”

“Not mist, but solid grey, Sal.” Nizar swallows. “Instinct. When a house-elf cannot trace one life’s thread, then to me that speaks of so many deaths that they cannot comprehend any of what they See.”

“Voldemort doesn’t have the ability to do such a thing. Nor would it appeal to him. He would have no one left to rule over,” Salazar says in attempted reassurance. It probably is not working very well. He certainly does not feel assured.

“Unless it’s an accident.”

Salazar glares at Nizar. “I am not telling anyone that there is a chance Voldemort may destroy the world on accident, little brother.”

“That’s fine. I’m not fond of the idea of sharing such things, either.” Nizar chews on the edge of his thumbnail. “I wonder if that’s why I might inform him of the child’s identity. A distraction from his doing something stupid, and thus he actually dies, instead of…whatever that grey muck represents.”

“In that case, Nizar, I hope you spit that particular truth into his arrogant, noseless face.”

* * * * *

Blake Shelby does not seek out Minerva until after breakfast on Tuesday morning, finding Minerva as she prepares to exchange her office for her classroom. Nizar made a very good point at lunch yesterday, an example she emulated. Minerva expects another day of students with curious questions about Transfiguration—those who wish for a distraction—and questions about the last war—those who wish to be prepared. The ghoulish sort of questions tend to come from those who have yet to know the pain of loss, or from baby Death Eaters pretending to be nothing of the sort. Minerva has made it plain what she thinks of the latter questions, and not many have dared make another attempt after the first few were voiced.

“Can I help you, Mx. Shelby?” Minerva asks, resuming her seat behind her desk. If this is to be another conversation like the one she had with Mister Creevey the night before, she wants a bit of polite distance between them. At breakfast, Colin seemed resolved, but Dennis is still a silent little ghost in comparison—and Colin has placed himself between Dennis and anyone who might prod at his younger brother for the wrong sort of reasons.

“Yes, Professor.” Blake settles themselves as if wearing a skirt, despite their trousers. Minerva suspects they have not been able to shed themselves of some youthful upper-class training in how a
girl should behave, despite not wanting a whit to do with most things considered to be the traditional realm of the feminine. They also haven’t done up their shirt properly to uniform standards, and the upper edge of Blake’s preferred white corset for their breasts is visible. Minerva briefly considers letting them know, but decides that wardrobe adjustments can wait.

“Go ahead, then,” Minerva says, smiling. “We have all day, but I shudder to think of what might happen to my classroom if I’m gone too long from it.”

Blake’s smile is brief, tired, and pained. “Yes, Professor. I was just coming to let you know that my aunt and uncle have made a formal claim for my guardianship—though that isn’t the important part, really. You’ll be receiving the letter from the Ministry soon enough, I guess.”

“I imagine so, yes,” Minerva responds quietly. “Is this regarding the funerary arrangements, Mx. Shelby?”

Blake nods, bites their lip, and bravely plows on. The Sorting Hat made such a good decision in regards to Mx. Shelby’s House. “They decided to observe a traditional seven days, so it will be this Friday. They don’t have the means to retrieve me from the school, so I’m asking if—if you’re available after breakfast Friday morning—can you escort me to their home by Floo? I can see myself back, of course—”

Minerva holds up her hand before Blake begins to stumble. “Would you like an escort to the funeral itself, as well? I can make time in my schedule, if the company is wanted.” It would require use of the Time-Turner she keeps locked away in her quarters, relic of her employment with the Ministry of Magic, but she suspects it might see quite a bit of use in the coming days.

Blake seems bewildered by the offer. “I—no, thank you, Professor. My family isn’t…I’ll be fine. But maybe you could offer that to Vanity? I think she doesn’t want to go alone and be the only Gryffindor amongst her relatives, even if most of them are decent sorts, but she’s…”

“Young,” Minerva finishes kindly. Despite having a Death Eater for a father, Vanity Jugson is still innocent in a way Minerva doesn’t think Blake has ever comprehended how to be. “I’ll make the offer after lunch, if you think your friend might need warning of my intentions.”

Blake stands up and runs their hands down their trousers, trying to smooth a skirt that isn’t there. “Thank you, Professor—and thank you for your time.”

Katie Bell and Jack Sloper approach her separately on Tuesday afternoon to inform Minerva that the funerals for their respective older Auror siblings will occur on Saturday. Given that Slytherin Richard Vaisey’s older Auror brother’s funeral falls within the same span of time, Minerva will definitely need the Time-Turner in order to pay her respects to all three fallen members from the department she once worked within.

Kellah Shafiq politely turns down Minerva’s offer of company for her father’s funeral, as her mother, Professor Shafiq, will be able to escort her. Minerva nods, unsurprised. Cassandra has been wearing her hijab since Sunday morning, observing the customs of her faith that she normally does not concern herself with—driven by grief, Minerva thinks, though she could be misjudging the other woman entirely. Politics are always to be considered in regards to someone who also holds a seat on the Wizengamot.

Raza Mohammad corners Minerva just before the dinner hour, beaming, to let Minerva know that his mother is being released from St. Mungo’s a day earlier than expected. “She is faring that well?” Minerva asks in pleased surprise.
Raza nods excitedly. “Yes! I mean, it totally sucks, what happened to the house, but Mum says the British government has found us a place in the same village, and they’re just going to give it to us! Can you believe that?”

Minerva smiles. With Nizar and Madam Tyler heading Hadrian’s Wall, she can indeed believe it. Granted, she believes Nizar would demand they rebuild the Mohammad home with their own bloody wands if there was no other resource to be had. “That is excellent news, Mister Mohammad.”

“Oh, and Mum wants to know if there will be any trouble in sending me home by Floo for Easter break,” Raza continues. “She’s making certain they hook up the new house to the Floo Network, and—with the train.” His expression falters. “You know.”

Minerva considers it before reaching out to give him a brief pat on the shoulder. “Mister Mohammad, I doubt you will be the only student with such a request. Make certain your mother writes to me so that it can be made official, but otherwise, that is fine.”

Vicky Frobisher thanks Minerva with icy politeness and chill finality when Minerva offers her an escort to the family home for her aunt’s upcoming funeral. Minerva sighs as Miss Frobisher departs; that one has chosen to be Death Eater to the core, and is nearly of age to accept the Dark Mark. As much as Minerva would like to bundle the idiot into a cupboard until she gains sense, she knows it cannot be done.

Minerva does not envy Pomona the difficulty in consoling Justin Finch-Fletchley right now. The young man is putting up a good show of aristocratic stiff upper lip, but when the entire faculty attends the mass Finch-Fletchley funerals on Sunday, Minerva expects that façade to crumble like stale biscuits.

Dean Thomas hands over a letter from his aunt directly, in which the woman claims legal guardianship after the death of his mother Louise. “And this meets with your approval, Mister Thomas?” Minerva asks. He’s sixteen as of this month, and thus old enough that he should have a say in such things.

Dean shrugs. “As long as she never finds out that I’m gay, it’ll be fine. Pretty sure I can keep that bombshell to myself until I graduate, anyway.”

“And after graduation, then?” That is a prying question, one she shouldn’t ask, but she has always had a soft spot for Mister Thomas.

“Well, Seamus well and truly expects to get booted by his parents when they find out about me, so I suppose I’ll be living with him. Mum had—” Dean’s voice breaks. “There is a bit of an inheritance, one that would get me a start on a decent flat, and it’s mine the moment I turn seventeen. Aunt Margaret can’t touch it. I’ll be all right, Professor, truly.”

Minerva nods, though she still has concerns. “And if your aunt discovers your fondness for Mister Finnigan before your graduation?”

“We’ve already discussed it. I’ll move in with Seamus. We’ll be in Hogwarts when we’re seventeen, anyway. Plenty of time to figure out a flat afterwards, Professor.”

Minerva raises an eyebrow. “Please do seek out another place to spend your summers until graduation if living arrangements with your aunt fail, Mister Thomas. I know that you and Mister Finnigan are well-suited, but you’re a bit young to be living together just yet.”

Dean grins at her. It makes his eyes seem a bit brighter. “We already live with each other ten months
out of the year, Professor.”

“And if I ever discover that you’ve gotten up to anything in that dorm beyond a bit of snogging, you won’t share a dorm again in this castle, either,” Minerva retorts. Dean salutes, swears upon his honor that he’ll save those shenanigans for a cupboard—she almost takes points for that, the scamp—and goes on his way.

The funerals for several of the deceased Death Eaters come after those of their victims, to Minerva’s relief. The staff briefly confers and then lays down the law—any student who attends one of those family funerals will be escorted directly to the funeral by a member of staff. That staff member will remain in attendance for the duration, and then bring the student back to the school at the conclusion of all related funerary activities. Most of those who will be departing are Pure-blooms from families who tend to observe specific traditions. Often the service is little more than a speech, a burial, and a brief wake. Only months later will a proper wake be held, free from the restrictions that Pure-blooms impose upon themselves out of respect for the dead.

Minerva snorts at the thought. For most of them, the formation of those traditions was nothing more than a show of politely false solidarity for those without the excessive wealth to host an extended wake immediately after a loved one’s death. She doubts those restrictions against rich food and drink are observed in private.

It’s the three Slytherin teachers who insist that every staff member and student to attend a Death Eater funeral be checked for signs of hexes or curses, particularly the Imperius Curse, upon their return to Hogwarts. Minerva doesn’t argue against that bit of good sense, and to her surprise, neither does anyone else. Not even Albus Dumbledore speaks against that one, though she notes his frown of disapproval and seethes. They have Marked students in this school, and while she prefers them to be in Hogwarts instead of standing with Voldemort, they do not need to compound that difficulty by not taking precautions! They certainly have enough baby Death Eaters performing endless detentions for their antics; she does not see the point to inviting yet more trouble out of a desire to appear altruistic.

“At least we won’t have to deal with that difficulty until next week,” Severus mutters under his breath as they depart the lounge on Tuesday evening. Full staff meetings have almost become commonplace, and it hasn’t yet been a week since the war began.

“I’ll be taking Miss Frobisher to her aunt’s funeral, though I will readily admit I’m not looking forward to that, and neither is she. Miss Frobisher already stated quite plainly that my company would not be welcome,” Minerva says.

“Filius will be attending Jerome Bluebell’s funeral, but I suspect he will be hoping to catch a glimpse of Miss Victoria Bluebell.” Severus frowns. “I think it’s a vain hope, but it’s his decision. You’re the one with the bulk of student funerals to deal with, Miss Frobisher aside.”

Minerva nods. “I’ve only been asked to attend the Jugson funeral and the Creevey family funeral, as the others wish to deal with their families on their own terms.” She isn’t looking forward to the Creevey funeral. Colin and Dennis will need warmth and caring of a sort Minerva isn’t certain she’s capable of. “What about you?”

“I don’t have students who need to attend funerals, but…” Severus grimaces. “Marcus Flint. He was no longer my student, but he only graduated last June. I feel as if I should attend. I might be the only one there, given that is father is deceased and his mother is in prison.”

Minerva remembers Mister Flint as a rather unpleasant individual, but he participated in class and behaved himself in her presence like a gentleman. A Death Eater, but a gentleman. “I’m sorry,
Severus.

Severus gives her a sour glance. “Save your pity for others. The students whose family members await trial will have need of it.”

* * * *

Severus goes up to Nizar’s quarters on Tuesday evening the moment his tasks are done for the day. He doesn’t Apparate, feeling that it soothes his paranoia to walk all the way from his office to the seventh storey and Nizar’s classroom door. It is gaining enough sense to appear at his approach instead of hiding, which saves him the frustration of pacing back and forth in front of blank stone.

Inside the classroom, he can hear the notes of a strung lute. Nizar’s office door is standing open, revealing that the door was set to his quarters. Severus knocks on the doorframe before entering, expecting to find that Salazar is present, and instead discovers that Nizar is sitting alone on the sofa that rests against the wall.

“What are you doing?” Severus asks, watching Nizar’s hands glide along the strings. Salazar is not present, no, but that is definitely the man’s lute. “I didn’t realize you could play.”

Nizar mutes the sound of the instrument by gentling his playing, but does not stop. “I never said I couldn’t play a stringed instrument, Severus. I only said it wasn’t to my preference.”

Severus sits down in a chair that is near the fire, giving him a clear view of the windows. He does not expect an attack on Nizar’s tower, especially at this height, but he survived the first war by listening to his instincts. It would be utterly stupid to put them aside now. “And yet, you’re playing your brother’s instrument.”

“Well, he’s busy and not currently using it,” Nizar replies. An unfamiliar melody slides into a song from the Mazzy Star album he purchased—fortunately not the tune that is mindful of Cedric Diggory’s unfortunate death. “Five String Serenade,” if he is recalling the record’s song listing correctly. “As for why? Sometimes it helps me to think, and I’ve been reviewing the steps for a magical working my head. I want to be certain it’s correct.”

“Would this be the one you mentioned before? The one that might avail you the means to find Voldemort?”

Nizar nods, though he does not linger long of “Five String Serenade” before it becomes the sharper, more jarring introductory notes of Pink Floyd’s “Shine On You Crazy Diamond.” Then it’s back to something unfamiliar again, though fortunately less jarring. “It’s not merely Blood Magic, or I could confer with Elfric. This is far beyond any skill he was able to attain in life.”

Severus studies Nizar’s distant expression. That is Mind Magic at play. Nizar is sifting, the term he always uses for the mental exercise of sorting through memory. “What else is involved?”

“An understanding of runes as well as a mastery of Pictish Magic.” Nizar tilts his head and allows the unfamiliar song to become one that Severus recognizes thanks to Miss Granger’s loaning of a Loreena McKennitt album. Nizar has been playing “The Mystic’s Dream” on the cherrywood recorder he owns, but it sounds interesting on a lute, as well. “With the masteries in my head settled well enough that an elf will recognize them, I shouldn’t have a difficulty, but it’s usually wiser to think on it first.”
“Should I depart, then?” Severus asks.

Nizar is startled enough that he stops playing. “Oh! No, actually, I was going to ask if you would be present. If one is going to fuck around with this sort of magic, it’s a good idea to have someone else standing outside the circle who can stun your arse if you start to wander.”

Severus frowns. “Wander?”

“Mentally. Magically.” Nizar puts the lute aside. “As I told Miss Granger, I doubt I will ever take an apprentice in Pictish magic—all remaining knowledge of it will probably die when I do. It isn’t to be fucked with, and it can be overwhelming, even if you have placed strict and set limits on what you wish to do.”

“How so?”

Nizar smirks. “Severus, I accidentally turned Godric’s nephew into a fucking tree when I was first beginning to learn. Fortunately, it was something I already knew how to fix, but that was not Transfiguration magic. That was Picti Magia.”

“I see.” Severus watches as Nizar stands up and sheds his robe, revealing one of his preferred linen shirts and older, modified trousers beneath. “And what did Godric’s nephew think of becoming a tree, however temporarily?”

“I had to hide from him for about a week, which included literally leaving Britain in Rowena’s company so as to give Leoric the chance to calm down. Sadly, I was actually aiming for Godric,” Nizar adds, grinning. “Gedeloc informed me that I was not allowed to repeat that stunt, especially on a Door Guardian.”

Severus smiles. “And why is it you were attempting to turn Godric Gryffindor into a tree in the first place?”

“Because there were very few ways in which to fuck with Godric, and he was beginning to get used to Conjured foreign serpents. That adjustment was ultimately a good thing, or else he would have fled the castle when Salazar and I returned from a visit to Burgos in 1015 with a pair of infant basilisks.”

Severus glances over at the hearth, where Kanza is awake and releasing a great deal of hissing laughter. “He still didn’t handle it well, did he?”

“Oh, he was fine with it all until he recalled exactly how large a basilisk can be.” Nizar begins unbuttoning his shirt.

“Do you need to be naked for this?” Severus asks in surprise. Not that he is opposed to the provided opportunity to ogle like a lecherous teenager, but he has never met anyone who practices magic in the nude.

“No, it’s not that. I just don’t want to ruin this shirt,” Nizar explains, tossing it onto the sofa to join his robe. Then he removes his boots and socks, though those are more properly placed into a hamper or set by the door, respectively. “I’ve become accustomed to modern trousers and don’t mind them as a replacement if I ruin these, but a shirt like this would be more difficult to replace. Linen is…” Nizar makes a face. “It’s different than before. It doesn’t have the same texture to my hand.”

“The dying process, perhaps. If it’s been done with different chemicals or by industrial process, that can alter a fabric’s feel,” Severus suggests.
“Maybe. Still. Why take chances?” Nizar removes the silver ring from his finger and tosses it at Severus, who catches it by sheer reflex. “Please hold onto that for me.”

“Of course.” Severus steps back a few paces as Nizar retrieves his wand from the leather holster strapped to his left arm and relocates the furniture, clearing a large space in the center of the sitting room. Then he frowns and Vanishes the carpet, as well.

“Should I be preparing for fire? Lava? Dying Horcrux-like results?” Severus asks in alarm.

Nizar removes the leather holster and places it on the closest table, along with his wand. “Not the latter. Probably not the other two. It’s more like…” He pauses, searching for words. “The runes can leave traces of themselves behind. I didn’t want to leave that pattern burnt into the rug. Hogwarts, at least, can remove those traces herself if she doesn’t want them.”

Severus watches as Nizar settles onto the stone floor, resting on his knees but otherwise seated upright. “How disturbing is this to witness?”

“You’ve seen me write runes directly into the air.” Nizar smiles. “This is a bit more complex than that.”

“Very well.” Severus retrieves his wand, wanting it in his hand. “How will I know if something goes wrong, and I should be stunning your foolish arse?”

“The pitch of the magic changes—and no, I have no idea how to describe it other than that,” Nizar says ruefully. “It’s a feeling in the air. If you’re present from the start, you just know. You have good instincts, Severus. I trust you.”

I trust you. Severus draws in a deep breath and steels himself. He is never going to betray that granted trust. “Then I will do my best. Can I speak to you during this process?”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. I need silence. If you have questions, ask me afterwards. Possibly also shove me into a running shower of cold water until I’m speaking the right language again.”

“Agreed,” Severus says dryly, and then falls silent as Nizar clasps his hands together. The Pictish he speaks has a hint of Old Brittonic to it, along with a vague reminder of the Cumbric Nizar is re-learning, but otherwise is very much its own entity.

The glyphs Nizar spoke of do not appear in the air, or on the floor. They first appear on Nizar’s bare skin. Severus has to bite down on his own tongue to hide a startled noise. The markings are a very dark green with hints of blue, but have no glow to them.

Tattoos, he realizes. If a Metamorphmagus can alter everything about themselves, why not hide tattoos that would otherwise be exceptionally distinctive?

Severus circles Nizar with quiet steps, finding that the Pictish symbols wrap Nizar’s arms from shoulder to wrist, even marking the tops of his hands. His face is framed by them at his hairline and jaw, though there are only two characters beneath his eyes. The tattoos are also on his torso, shaped and formed as if they were a garment meant to be worn.

The spell that Nizar is speaking reaches an end, and with the final word, the glyphs light up with the emerald light of the Deslizarse family magic. Many of the Pictish markings slide off of Nizar’s skin and onto the floor, where they surround him with burning green fire—a proper protective circle, if an incomprehensible one.

Severus realizes his jaw is hanging open and snaps it shut. He has seen stranger things. No; he has
seen absolutely terrible things, but aside from Nizar’s falling from a painting on Hallowe’en, this is the oddest event he has ever witnessed.

Nizar separates his hands so they are no longer clasped together. With his eyes closed, he begins a second spell. Then his right hand draws a sharp cut through the air. A line of blood wells up on his left palm. It’s not deep enough to damage Nizar’s hand, but is still willing to bleed freely.

Severus watches as Nizar clenches his left fist, squeezing until blood begins to drip from his palm directly onto the glowing fire of the circle. The only words Severus recognize within the spell are Deslizarse, Potter—interesting decision—Tom Marvolo Riddle, and Voldemort.

When the blood drops onto the circle of Pictish symbols, they flare so bright that Severus has to blink spots from his eyes. They are now moving on the floor like an undulating creature, and have been joined by more of the Pictish marks from Nizar’s arms. Only the two on his face are still in their proper place. They are glowing with a faint green light, one which turns to silver, sparking fire. That is the color Nizar’s magic most often reveals itself as if he is working with blood, but there is something far more electrical about this display. It’s making Severus’s hair want to stand on end in protest.

Nizar suddenly opens his eyes, which are glowing with that same silver fire. Whatever he says, Severus can’t translate, but he strongly suspects profanity.

That is when the tone of the magic changes, and Severus comes to understand exactly what Nizar meant. When this work began, the magic was wild and elemental. Now there is a sour note that makes everything Nizar is doing seem to be wrong. Foul. Tainted.

Without even thinking on it, Severus raises his wand and casts the most powerful stunning spell he knows. Silver flame blasts apart on an invisible wall in the air, blocked by the warding walls of the glowing circle. Furious, Severus instinctively draws upon Hogwarts’ magic and casts the spell again. This time, the result is a relief. Nizar gasps and topples over in a heap. It’s still unnerving to watch as the symbols on the floor climb back to their previous locations on Nizar’s body, but at least they are no longer glowing. The tattoos do not fade when that is done; Severus suspects it will take a conscious act to hide them again.

Only then does Severus lean against the table, feeling like he should be panting for breath. He’s never asked the castle for assistance before, not like that, but she responded to him without hesitation. Possibly he should not have channeled that much magic at once, but at least it had the desired effect.

Nizar does not regain consciousness until Severus is holding him under the cold water of the shower in his bathroom. “Whafuck?” he slurs, opening his eyes to reveal that they are once again their typical, grey-dominant hazel.

“You told me to stun you and shove you into a shower until you regained your senses, so that is exactly what I’m fucking doing,” Severus replies, grateful for the warming charms he cast on his own person. He’s amazed it took this long for the frigid water to gain Nizar’s attention.

“Oh.” Nizar closes his eyes, swallows, and then uses Severus’s arms to brace himself until he’s standing on his own. Then he glowers at the cold setting on the tap and turns it until it’s almost scalding. “That absolute fucking waste of flesh,” he mutters.

“I take it the spellwork disaster was fruitful, then.”

Nizar finishes soaking his hair with hot water and then glances at him. “It was, yes. Voldemort is still
in Britain. However, I don’t know where. He put a brilliant shield in place.”

“Is that what soured the magic?” Severus asks, finding a bar of soap and handing it over when Nizar starts searching for it. It is obvious he is feeling the need to remove the foulness that emerged with the last of the Pictish spell.

“Yes. It’s a well-executed trap, too. Well, as long as the person prodding at it doesn’t know what they’re doing. It could be fatal for anyone else who tries to locate him by blood.” Nizar looks to be trying to scrub off several layers of skin. “Why, why, why is that walking corpse only intelligent when it’s of complete inconvenience to me?”

Severus can’t help but smile in response to the oft-repeated complaint. “Would it have killed you, if I hadn’t stunned you?”

“No.” Nizar rinses soap from his hair, realizes he is still in his trousers, and starts swearing as he begins to yank off soaked cloth. “I would not have been happy for at least a week if you hadn’t intervened when you did, but no, it wouldn’t have been fatal. I would have just used up a great deal of energy in getting myself out of the fucking stupid trap.”

Severus shakes his head and begins helping Nizar with the stubborn trousers when he notices that Nizar’s hands are shaking. “Are you all right?”

Nizar meets his gaze, allowing Severus to see an utter lack of shielding—and that he is speaking truthfully. “Yes. I am irritated, annoyed, confused, and tired, but there is absolutely nothing wrong with me. Please go ahead and ask about the tattoos before it drives you fucking mental.”

Severus’s lips curl up, though the expression is partly in approval of Nizar’s revealed cock and arse as he finally gets his trousers off of his hips and down to his thighs. From that point, it’s a much easier process to remove them. “What are the tattoos for, beyond their obvious assistance in the magic you were casting?”

Nizar kicks away the wet trousers in triumph before reclaiming the soap. There are Pictish symbols on his legs, as well, though only from his knees down to his ankles. “When any practitioner of Pictish magic was considered to have mastered everything there was to learn, they were granted tattoos by their teaching master, applied by magic. What is written onto their skin is chosen specifically for the person who will wear them, so no Pictish mage ever had the same markings. They are personalized, tailored to their skills and talents. Given all of the things I insisted in dabbling in, Gedeloc was thorough in what he wrote onto me. Then, of course, I irritated the hell out of him by using the Metamorphmagus mastery to hide them. He understood why, once he realized I wasn’t attempting to insult him.”

Nizar rinses away the last of the soap and turns off the water before he leans forward, resting his head against the stone-tiled wall. “Magicians like Gedeloc were rare. He was the last *Picti Magia* of his people, and knew of only three other surviving Pictish mages. I was proud to have been his student—I still am—but in those days, people knew what those markings signified. I already attracted enough bloody trouble by being Myrddin’s named successor. I didn’t think that problem needed to be made worse by advertising what else I was capable of doing.”

Severus helps Nizar to dry off when he stumbles on his way out of the shower. “Was it worth it, then? The spell, not the mastery.”

“We needed to know if Voldemort was still in Britain. If he was elsewhere on this earth, then whatever country he was residing in deserved fair warning.” Nizar uses part of the towel to scrub at his face. “Just our bad luck, I suppose, that he has no intention of leaving. I think I liked it better
when the stupid fuck was hiding in Albania.”

Severus lets out an amused snort. “So did I. Do you plan to hide these tattoos again, or will you go out tomorrow and remind the students that you are a terrifying relic of a magician?”

“Ugh. No. I don’t think I could manage that tonight. I feel like I could fall on my face and sleep right now.” Nizar’s expression brightens. “Which is fantastic, actually.”

“I do notice that you aren’t protesting the label of terrifying relic.”

Nizar shrugs. “It’s true. Come to bed with me?”

Severus nods his agreement, though he does take the time to help Nizar dress for bed. If an emergency occurs in the middle of the night, he doubts either of them would want to face it naked.

It is a sudden, gut-wrenching temptation to reach for Nizar’s hand, to place Nizar’s ring back onto his finger himself. Severus forces the urge to bugger off, and then drops the ring into Nizar’s open palm. “You should have that back.”

“Mm. Yes, thank you,” Nizar murmurs, sliding it into place on his left middle finger. If he noticed Severus’s sudden fucking crisis of bloody panicked indecision, he gives no sign.

“One more thing,” Severus adds as he readies for bed.

Nizar is gazing at him with a faint expression of pleasure, doubtless taking the opportunity to view bare flesh while the chance is granted. “Yes?”

“The next time you decide to perform some sort of magic like this, please remember to inform me that you have both extensive tattoos, and that those magical tattoos remove themselves from your person to dwell on the floor for the fucking duration.”

“I can probably do that?” Nizar offers. “Unfortunately, I’d forgotten about the latter bit until it was in the midst of happening.”

“Whenever possible, then,” Severus amends, and then climbs into bed. He latches onto Nizar’s arm so he can trace the Pictish symbols with his fingers. “You do realize that I now desire to learn these symbols just to know what this says.”

Nizar smiles. “Then I’ll teach you the language.”

“The language, or the magic itself?” Severus asks, curious. “Though I will admit I believed that these were merely Pictish symbols. I thought their language to be different.”

“You mean Ogham? No, that one is from Ireland. It was popularly adopted by the Picts because it made it easier for them to communicate with the Gaels. True Pictish is much older than Ogham.” Nizar raises an eyebrow. “As for the magic…do you want to be the bearer of tattoos that melt off your skin to park themselves on the floor while they’re in use?”

Severus makes a face. “No.”

Nizar leans forward and catches Severus’s lower lip with gentle teeth before turning the gesture into a kiss. “I didn’t think so. Ehm’a ber isil’ee.”

Severus frowns. “Which means what?”

“I’ll tell you around about the time you properly translate nishmati for me.”
Filius finally convinces Pomona that yes, she really should agree to be tied into the magic.

Nizar appreciates this, but would like it very much if that moment hadn't been accompanied by things he wasn't in the mood to remember. (Ever.)

Chapter Notes

Tis the Mate @drougnor's birthday today. He is now the answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything. (But he's been my answer for a long time now.)

In Hobbity fashion, you guys get a bonus chapter for the week. (And so does he, as he's been behaving himself and not reading ahead. *g*)

Also, Plotting and Feels Train. Prepare the Bun Scale!

Nizar dreams that night in a way that has been lacking of late. Some of it is flashes of memory, all of it battles he has fought in. War is on his mind; this does not much surprise him.

He sits beside Galiena on the southern Iberian coast, discussing the current status of Hogwarts and the isle with her as they watch the waves roll in to kiss the sand. “It’s a bloody mess.”

“It does sound like it,” Galiena agrees. “Brice and Elfric would be right in the thick of it if they could be, Brice in particular.” She tilts her head. “Something is to happen soon, something that will force the hands of all those who are keeping secrets held against their breast.”

“What?”

“If I knew, Father, I would definitely tell you,” Galiena replies, and then that fragment of dreaming is gone from him. He resents that even in his sleep; it was good to converse with his daughter again, though she was only his mind supplying what was needed to translate a faint divinatory spark.

He dreams of an island that holds no hope to it at all. The land is so altered that nothing will grow in the soil. Magic lies beneath the island still, but it is soaked in despair and death, as is the black, craggy tower that rises into a dull grey sky.

Azkaban, Nizar thinks, and has even less desire to visit it than before. He was right; the Council of his time would have considered this place to be barbaric. That it was used to imprison magicians in this time is fucking unbelievable. It’s possibly an actual, gods-created miracle that Sirius escaped from this island and is still (mostly) sane.

Do you know what this is, Mister Potter? That is Severus, though he is taller than Nizar recalls. The expression on his face is stern, severe, and cold. He is seeing the mask of the spy.
Nizar glances at the tiny phial held in Severus’s hand. He knows what it is, but the memory—it must be a memory—does not. *Pumpkin juice, sir?* he asks in a flat, uninterested tone.

He wakes up doing his best to stifle near-hysterical laughter, hoping not to wake Severus. He keeps his hand clamped over his mouth, thinking that it is possibly *also* a miracle that the child and Severus really did not kill each other. There had been hostility in that memory, yes, but the sharp perfection of that sarcasm makes Nizar wonder how often the child employed it as such an effective weapon.

Nizar resolves to ask Severus about that, but later. For now, he much prefers that Severus continue to sleep, even if sleep is done with Nizar for the day. At least a quick check of his watch reveals that it is nearly five in the morning. He slept for most of the night, a rarity during wartime, and is glad of it.

He writes Severus as brief note regarding his location before leaving the bedroom. There are other revelations that last night’s magic brought, and now he needs to seek answers.

No matter whether Salazar has slept or not, the best time to ambush his brother has always been dawn.

He Apparates directly down to Salazar’s quarters, where he startles the hell out of the man just emerging from his own hallway. “You complete shit!” Salazar gasps out, leaning against the wall. “Is there a reason you’ve decided to appear in my rooms while resembling a Pictish terror?”

Nizar glances down at his hands. “Oh. Right. I forgot to put that back.” Then he looks back up and grins. “Salazar, *mi hermano. Buenos días a ti!”*

Salazar is immediately wary. “Fuck, now what? Please tell me it’s not yet another shift in Voldemort’s fate. I don’t think I can handle any more revelations similar to that unwanted grey sludge.”

“Oh, it’s not about that at all.” Nizar takes a step forward, amused when Salazar raises both eyebrows and takes an instinctive step back. “I’m wondering if you’d forgotten something about the ability to combine Pictish Magic and Blood Magic.”

“I certainly didn’t forget that it needs to be supervised!” Salazar exclaims, now far less concerned with Nizar’s manner of greeting.

“Severus was present. I was fine. Well, for given definitions of fine after I stumbled onto a walking corpse’s shield against intrusions. It still answered my question as to whether or not he was on this island.” Nizar grins. “Of course, if I’m putting power into breaking through blood magic meant to hide others from notice…”

His brother doesn’t prevaricate, but the tension in the room suddenly climbs into the range of the bloody mountaintops. “You saw them.”

“I saw that you have still-living descendants, you sneaky fucking bastard whom I dearly love,” Nizar replies. “Two in Britain, and a small number of them on the other side of the pond.”

Salazar nods, swallowing hard, before he motions them towards the sofa. “Can we please sit? If we’re to discuss this, I would much prefer tea and a privacy charm.”

“A privacy charm against the portraits?” Nizar asks in surprise.

“A portrait can be interrogated, and some of these frames have twins that allow their occupants to travel beyond the bounds of Hogwarts.” Salazar glances at still-sleeping Ouen and Imeyna, his first children by his marriage to Marion. “Well. Those who are inclined, at least.”
“They still won’t wake?” Nizar is feeling the glee of confrontation leave him. The sleeping portraits disturb him, especially as they no longer know if they sleep because of Hogwarts’ magic being damaged by the long-empty House Seats, or if Utredus did something foul to each one.

Imeyna and Ouen, at least, can be counted among the former. Utredus the Gaunt never entered these quarters.

“Not yet. I have hope that when Pomona Sprout sees the sense of holding the Northern Seat, that will change.” Salazar casts the privacy charm and sits down. A tea tray is popped into place almost before the motion is completed. “I do believe the elves are learning my habits.”

“And mine,” Nizar notes, discovering that there are two teapots instead of one. The pot nearest to him is emitting the fragrance of strong black gunpowder tea. Salazar’s seems far more fragrant in comparison—jasmine, perhaps. “Who are they, Sal?”

Salazar waves his hand over his teacup to cool the tea enough for drinking. “Those in North America are the few who remain of the Empress Marie’s descendants. My granddaughter,” he explains softly, “though it was not an intentional act that led to the birth of her mother.”

“Marie of Denmark, Marie of Russia, or Marie of Constantinople?” Nizar asks.

“Marie of Brienne, the last Empress Consort of Constantinople. She hated it.” Salazar’s expression is weary regret. “Not that there was anything to be done to change her position but wait for Constantinople to finally collapse at the hands of the Byzantines. She birthed only one child who lived to sire a child of his own. For the longest time, there was only ever a single child for each generation that carried on the Deslizarse blood in that family’s veins.

“After one of those singular children chose to become a colonist in the so-called New World, the tree branched out a bit, though not by much. Not a single one of them have ever shown a hint of magical talent, not since their line began with Berenguela. I don’t think magic will ever find Marie’s descendants again, but I still would not leave anyone to suffer Voldemort’s lacking mercies if he decided to attempt blood magic to seek out other kin.”

“And because they have been non-magical for so long, even if you hadn’t hidden them, Goblin magic might have overlooked them, anyway.” Nizar sips at his tea. He feels a hint of Salazar’s weariness, but it is almost overcome by the gladness that there is something left of their family aside from themselves—no matter their lacking magic. “And those in Britain?”

“A father and his daughter, both magical,” Salazar admits. “The magic I placed to protect them is so strong I am actually surprised you discerned them at all, especially given how distant their kinship is to me.”

Nizar sits in silence, waiting until they have both consumed a first full cup of tea. “They’re part of the Underground, aren’t they?”

Salazar nods, though Nizar knows his brother. He doesn’t want to admit to that, for all this particular cat is out of its sack. “I do my best to keep them as far from Voldemort’s activities and people as possible, and the girl’s father is sensible enough to listen. Most of the time, at least. Stubbornness runs in our blood just as much as the magic of Parseltongue, hermanito.”

“Will I ever meet them? Or any member of your Underground?”

“I’d prefer to avoid it until Voldemort is dead, but there is always a chance that it will happen.” Salazar offers him a faint smile. “It would be nice to introduce you to them, and those two in
particular. I’ve found it a comfort to know that our line is not truly dead, if so scattered that it nearly makes no difference at all.”

“Well, you never know. You could have a child with Minerva,” Nizar teases. “If she’s aged the same as the average female magician in this century, she may still have that ability.”

“She says not, but thank you very much for making me paranoid. I don’t—” Salazar presses his lips together, grieved. “I would not regret sharing that joy with the Lioness, little brother, but I have no wish to orphan a child.”

Nizar sighs. “I do understand that.”

“You can also still adopt,” Salazar says in revenge. “You are still young for a magician, no matter the centuries spent in a painting.”

Nizar chokes on tea and laughter. “Oh, gods. Sal, could you picture Severus attempting to be a parent? I think he would flee for the bloody hills!”

“We’re already in the hills. He would flee to the safety of flat land,” Salazar counters dryly. “And I believe he would tolerate a child of yours more than you might think.”

Nizar shakes his head. “I raised my children, Sal. I don’t think I’ve the heart or the inclination to raise another.”

Salazar smiles at him. “That’s what I said, too, and yet when it happened twice by chance after Marion’s passing…I could not find it within myself to regret. I was not expecting it in Athens, either, but Ismene was much like Alicia in being a force of nature, one not to be denied once she’d set her heart on something.” He glances down at his teacup. “I still regret that my marriage to Isis remained childless. She wanted children so badly, and we were finally beyond the constant danger of the plagues, but…such was not to be.”

“Am I to keep the secret of your living descendants from everyone?” Nizar asks. This is one instance in which he needs to hear those certain words.

“Gods, yes,” is Salazar’s immediate response. “If I was not about to tell you, hermanito, not until the danger of Voldemort had passed…”

“I understand.” Nizar makes certain Salazar sees the forgiveness in his eyes. “This is not about trust, and I know it, Sal. Safety transcends such things. The age of many of those blood protections predate the child’s birth. I’ll not be insulted that you went to such measures to keep the slight remains of our family safe from a madman. If Galiena had any surviving descendants, I would feel similarly about keeping them safe.”

Salazar’s shoulders slump in relief. “I thought you would understand—you more than all of us—but still, I admit I harbored a fear you would be angered by it.”

“Angry?” Nizar ponders the idea. “I would only have been angry if the reasons had been foolish. I would also like to think the 992 portrait of myself would not teach you specific blood magic spells for stupid reasons.”

“No. Not foolish, but certainly daunting,” Salazar replies.

Nizar nods and decides to nudge the subject in a less fraught direction. It is too obvious that Salazar still fears for the few descendants left of his line, no matter that those in North America have likely never met their living ancestor. “The house you lived in with Isis in Sherwood-on-the-Marsh, the one
you call the Willow House. I’d love to see it one day.”

“When Voldemort is dead,” Salazar insists. “I’ve had to alter my will in light of what Her Majesty declared. The title of Marquésa of the Highland Council will belong to Minerva, as is proper, but I’m granting the Willow House to you upon my death.”

Nizar glares at him. “While I admire your planning, I am still going to attempt to stop your death from happening!”

“You cannot argue with Death, hermanito,” Salazar says gently.

Nizar snorts his opinion of that. “Fucking well watch me.”

*          *          *          *

When Severus enters the Great Hall on Wednesday morning, Nizar is already present, sitting in his usual place with a pot of steaming tea nearby. One of Elfric’s books is on the table, revealing his insane note-taking skills as applied to what appears to be a multitude of ways to use and abuse a basic Shielding Charm. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Nizar replies. He was gone from the bed when Severus awoke, but Severus never takes it as a slight. He would have done the same had he woken early.

“I found your note regarding your visit to Salazar. Did you otherwise sleep at all?” Severus asks, pouring tea after seating himself. It is still early enough that only the early risers among the students are in the Hall, nibbling at the first breakfast offerings or wisely searching out tea and coffee.

“For quite a while, surprisingly,” Nizar answers, and then closes the book with the current sheet of his translated notes tucked into its pages. “You might enjoy today’s papers—or more specifically, the reaction to them.”

“Oh?” Severus eyes him. There are two articles that he knows have been held in reserve, but is only aware of the contents of one. “The war mage article at last?”

“No, Joyous has managed to schedule that for Friday. A breath of fresh air, she called it, and I think she’s correct on her timing.” Nizar claims his tea and sips at it before smiling. “No, this is something Sal and I volunteered for.”

Severus hides a smirk with his teacup. “The intent is to fuck with people, then?”

“A bit of that. Why not take advantage when it’s been provided?” Nizar looks at Severus, his hazel eyes alight with mischief. Severus experiences a mild jolt at the sight. Things have been dire of late, and he had no idea how much he’d missed seeing that expression on Nizar’s face. “It’s also a reminder, and a bit of history, something I think Wizarding Britain could use right now.”

“The reminder, or the history?”

Nizar shrugs. “Both are preferable.”

The Great Hall fills with students, though Severus notes that they are still quieter than the norm. If no other attacks occur, they will gradually return to their typically loud shenanigans—but he does not
suspect that to be the case. There will be more. Voldemort does not make such bold moves unless he already has plans which follow afterward.

The *Prophet, Quibbler*, and *Witch Weekly* owls begin arriving promptly at 7:30, many of them delivering their parcels by dropping them in the vicinity of the intended. The more polite birds land properly, exchanging newspapers and mail for bites of food that was never meant for an owl’s palate.

Severus rolls his eyes at the theft of bacon from the owl that brings his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. Another letter falls from the ceiling to join it. At least the Post Owl who delivered the letter had better aim than most. He picks it up and notes the seal: Narcissa. It is either a matter regarding Draco, or she has something planned that involves sharing polite company with Death Eaters.

Nizar and Salazar have received similar letters. Severus rather hopes he’ll again be witness to Nizar’s stabbing of an idiot.

“Whoa!” Severus hears one of the Weasley twins exclaim. He glances up just in time to witness Fred grin at the Slytherin end at the table—at Nizar and Salazar in particular. “That’s a great photograph, Professors. Top marks for looking hot!”

Salazar snorts and rolls his eyes. Nizar just smirks. “It’s rude to shout compliments across an entire Hall, Fred Weasley.”

“Deserving compliments, though!” Fred declares, but he does sit back down.

Severus glances around at how many students are now riveted to their morning newspapers. He would rather wait until he’s finished the meal before unrolling his copy, but Severus was never that patient.

The headline that greets him definitely warrants his attention:

*The Return of the House of Slytherin*

*by Joyous Spencer*

*Photographs courtesy of John Dervish*

Severus frowns in confusion at the mention of multiple photographs. There is only one on upper half of the front page. It’s Salazar and Nizar, a full-color photograph. The room they stand in is mindful of a non-magical office, or perhaps a library meant for work rather than pleasure. Salazar is leaning against the table in a rather indolent slouch that definitely informs another of his character. Nizar is standing next to Salazar, and appears to be an inch or two taller given that he refuses to slump. Salazar is wearing a t-shirt, denims, worn boots, and his favored leather jacket that might possibly be as immortal as he is, given its obvious age. Nizar, by contrast, is wearing the very first modern button-down shirt and thigh-length coat that Bernice chose for him in London during the winter holiday, though he has paired them with denims and the boots he purchased with metal hidden in the toes. They were meant to be built for workplace safety, but Severus knows Nizar was only thinking of his ability to kick someone in a manner that might easily break their limbs.

Then the photograph changes, slowly morphing into a new image. Salazar and Nizar have switched places and poses as well as clothing, and are wearing the ancient silk shirts, truis, boots, and long, metal-embroidered vests that they sported at Narcissa’s Christmas gathering. For those who have
never seen it before, it’s a stark reminder of where they came from, and how long it’s been since that
time.

Asthute readers might recall that when I originally wrote of Britain’s new war mages, I mentioned
Nizar and Salazar Slytherin by name, but said very little about them. It was a deliberate decision on
my part, as I felt their presence demanded its own article. There is too much history represented
here to do otherwise, and many reminders that the stories we think we know to be facts were never
true at all.

Born before the new millennium, Nizar and Salazar Slytherin have a certain reputation, though
sadly the younger brother’s exploits have been largely forgotten by Wizarding Britain. Her Majesty
Queen Elizabeth II had more knowledge of Nizar’s history as Britain’s only living war mage, and it
is a sad state of affairs when there is no literature to be had in the Wizarding World regarding his life
at all.

Certain newspaper articles, published before the new year, do not count.

Severus finds himself smiling. That dig at Rita Skeeter was not the least bit subtle, and he doesn’t
mind its obviousness at all.

Born on the 28th of December in 969, Salazar Fernan of Casa de Deslizarse, the Ancient House of
Serpents, is the son of Spain’s primary war mage and titled Marqués de León due to his marriage to
Salazar’s mother, legal Heir to the title of Marquésa de León.

When Salazar’s father passed unexpectedly, Salazar took his place as primary and titled war mage
for the kingdom. It was a title he later gave to another, but it was heartening to learn that the role of
a war mage was not new for this ancient man.

The article continues along much the same vein, giving an excellent summary of Salazar’s history
without wandering off into details that neither brother would want the public to be aware of. Severus
makes an amused noise when he sees that Joyous lists Nizar’s date of birth as the first of March, but
says he is five years younger than Salazar rather than naming a specific year. He wonders how hard
Joyous pressed for that detail, and what Nizar might have said to make her cease asking.

Joyous also refers to Rita’s ridiculous November article regarding Nizar’s appearance in the castle,
admitting that at least Skeeter got the facts correct in regards to Nizar literally falling out of a painting
due to the end of a complicated magical working. That is followed by a quote from Madam Amelia
Bones, who speaks of handling the fragments of canvas and frame that had once safeguarded Nizar,
and how much lingering, strong magic she could still sense in those broken pieces.

The quote from Sirius Black, stating that Nizar Slytherin is the first Slytherin he ever met he did not
immediately despise, is as amusing as it is irritating. The wanker still has yet to apologize for nearly
murdering Severus via werewolf when they were in school together. He ponders the idea of
mentioning to Nizar that perhaps Black could do with a reminder.

Severus isn’t certain what he would do with an apology if Black could muster a genuine one, but it is
preferable to the blame cast in his direction by all parties—not James Potter, at least. Potter chose to be an idiot again at the end of the year, but regarding the werewolf incident, at least, he was not a complete bastard.

_The Deslizarse brothers, founders of the House of Slytherin, respectively an actual Founder of Hogwarts and Protectoris of the school, are 1,026 and 1,021 years old, respectively. Not even the famous Nicholas Flamel can claim such a lifespan, nor even Merlin himself._

_Salazar Slytherin tells me that Merlin, known then as Myrddin Wyllt, cursed him to live longer than he while he was still the ancient wizard’s apprentice. I do believe he was serious regarding the curse. Nizar Slytherin said Myrddin did much the same to him, but foisted the title of Bellum dux Magum on his shoulders while doing so. They seem to be as fond of Merlin as much as they found him to be infuriating. It does rather fit with the stories that survive of Merlin’s exploits, though it takes some research to make certain one has the dates of his lifespan correct. He was not a Slytherin himself, but he certainly helped to create the first and greatest of them._

_The Protectoris attempted to bribe me to omit that last line. I was tempted, but a reporter’s job is to speak the truth._

“She is doing an excellent job of making you both seem real, human, and as fallible as the rest of us, if entirely ancient,” Minerva comments.

Severus glances over just in time to watch Salazar’s expression morph into a sulk. “I’m not old!”

“No, just vain as a bloody peacock,” Nizar mutters under his breath, smiling.

“What was the purpose of this article?” Severus asks him. “Aside from what Minerva has correctly claimed.”

“A bit less fear, awe, and dread among the general public of Wizarding Britain would be nice, yes, but I am also hoping to plant doubt,” Nizar says, turning his newspaper to see that Joyous included the photograph that was taken of all of the war mages during the visit to Frogmore.


Nizar nods. “I know he will never be convinced as to Salazar’s true identity, but if there is even a hint of doubt, a crack in that belief…that can be useful. People who harbor doubts are people who sometimes make grave mistakes.”

“Was that a deliberate pun, or an expressed hope?”

“Grave?” Nizar rolls up his copy of _The Quibbler_, which is likely filled with a hell of a lot of nonsense to make up for the seriousness of its front page. “Much like history and this pointed reminder, I am fine with the idea of both.”

* * *
“All right. I’ll do it.”

Nizar pauses in the midst of cleaning up the wreckage of the classroom with his wand. His fourth-years were subdued when class began, so he hadn’t quite expected this energetic a session. Too many of them were now a bit paranoid about their defence, but better that than lackluster concern. He finally turns to greet the visitor standing in his doorway. “Pomona, there is so much going on that I’m afraid I’ll need you to be a bit more specific.”

Pomona Sprout frowns, an expression that he would deem petulant if it were anyone else. With her it’s not a sign of sulking so much as an odd way of emoting feelings she doesn’t have words to describe. Nizar has had an interesting time learning to interpret Pomona’s body language since first meeting her this past November. “The tying in of the Heads of House to Hogwarts. I’ll do it.”

“Oh.” Nizar steadies the last desk and then gestures for her to come into his classroom properly. “You might as well shut the door and join me in my quarters. If you’re serious, then it’s something we should discuss privately, but I am not skipping lunch today.”

Pomona smiles a bit, a hint of relief on her features, before she closes the door. They have not been friends so much as uneasy allies; she may well have expected he would turn her away. “Minerva has mentioned that your quarters are conveniently close to your classroom.”

“That they are.” Nizar flips the cast-iron S to swap the entrance away from his office before pushing his door open. “Please come in.”

Pomona removes her hat as she steps inside, revealing the wispy grey, wiry curls of her hair. “It’s quite sunny and cheerful in here. Not what I expected at all.”

“We’re in a tower. Did you expect a dank dungeon?” Nizar asks, smirking a bit when Pomona gives him a look that says she expected exactly that. “I’ve always liked to spend my time in high places, Pomona. My portrait might have been in the Slytherin Common Room underground, but within the painting itself, the sun was almost always bright during the day. I used to climb up onto the roof of my home just to sit at a height in the sunshine.”

Pomona looks startled. “You could do that in a portrait?”

“It was a very complicated magical working,” Nizar says. “I think Rowena and Salazar would never have forgiven themselves if it had not been properly done.”

“Because they knew how long you’d spend within it.” Pomona bites her lip before she resists the urge to ask whatever is on her mind. Instead, she hangs her hat and greenhouse-dirtied outer robe on pegs by the door, casts a cleansing charm on her boots, and then ventures further inside. Nizar closes the door and sends a brief Patronus to Sal, letting him know with a Parseltongue message why he won’t be present at lunch. It was one thing to keep his own counsel about his schedule before, but with war on their doorstep, it’s a kindness to keep him apprised when he’s not going to be in an expected place. Salazar does the same for him, as does Severus—three Slytherins who understand that it is not paranoia to do so, but sensibility.

The elves, with their usual sense of grand timing, pop a tea tray onto Nizar’s table, followed quickly by a full selection of whatever meal is in place for lunch downstairs. “Please, sit,” Nizar requests. “I would very much like to know what changed your mind, but I can’t afford to skip a meal to do so.” His sleep schedule and heightened sense of alertness is draining enough, but Poppy Pomfrey would hand him his arse if he ended up in her hospital wing again for lack of eating.

“That’s fine by me. I don’t mind conversing over food,” Pomona agrees. Nizar notes the tense set of
her shoulders and nearly sighs in frustration. He won’t be able to join her to the castle’s magic if she doesn’t trust him to do so, but he doesn’t yet know what to say to calm her.

She doesn’t speak again until after Nizar has poured tea for himself and discovered that the meat of the meal is duck. He literally hasn’t eaten duck in centuries, so it’s a pleasant surprise, if an odd one. He’s never once seen Hogwarts’ elves put it on offer.

Given the look of delight on Pomona’s face, maybe it’s one of her favorites. If so, the elves are being both sneaky and brilliantly politic, as usual.

“It was Filius,” Pomona says when the meal is half done. Nizar didn’t mind spending part of their time in silence, not when it seems to have done the woman some good in regards to her nerves. “When the magical integration was complete, Filius Apparated directly into my office to speak with me about it.” She smiles. “The dear wanker scared the bloody life out of me with that stunt.”

“But gained your attention,” Nizar points out, and Pomona grants him a rueful nod.

“That he did.” The Irish accent that is normally almost washed out of her voice thickens a bit. “Filius explained everything he experienced during the days after you tied him to Hogwarts by magic. He showed me what he could do with it, and told me what he was aware of in regards to our miscreants if there was a danger to them—even if it was the louts only being a danger to themselves.”

“I know you’ve heard the same from Minerva. Why was it different with Filius?” Nizar asks, but suspects he knows.

Pomona’s ruddy cheeks darken a bit from a blush. “I did, yes. But, she’s dating your brother, and that makes her a bit…biased.”

Nizar smiles. “And as Severus is dating myself, you would also consider him to be biased. Would it be rude of me to point out that your bias against Slytherin House itself was showing?”

“No. More truthful than I might like, but not wrong,” Pomona admits. “I’ll be honest in return and say that I don’t even understand why I gained such a distrust of Slytherin House in the first place! I went to school in Ireland, a proud graduate of Acadamh na hÉireann um Theagasc Draíochta, and we didn’t even hold with separate Houses the way Hogwarts does.”

“The Irish Academy of Magical Instruction,” Nizar translates. “I think I recall when I first heard of Éireann’s intention of opening its own magical academy. Sometime after Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, I believe, but I don’t remember when.”

Pomona looks happy to discover he was aware of her school. “In 1402, that was. It was meant to be 1350, but when the Black Death came to the isle two years previous…”

“Yes, that…did tend to lay waste to plans as well as lives,” Nizar agrees quietly. “My family,” he adds, when Pomona gives him a curious look. “All of my daughter’s descendants. It was not a kind thing to learn of.”

“I’m so very sorry,” Pomona says, surprising him when she reaches out to pat his hand in sympathy. “I don’t have much family to speak of, myself, but I know it’s nothing in light of that sort of loss.”

Nizar swallows and nods, placing the bulk of that emotion aside. Now is not the time. “Thank you for your words. I have to ask: is Filius the only thing that changed your mind?”

Pomona leans back to pour herself another cup of tea, then adds so much milk that it nearly turns white. “The war,” she says in a low voice. “That was already on my mind, and then Filius gave me
more reason to want it. And—they’re *my* Badgers,” she adds in sudden fierceness. “If this gives me more of a means to look after them, I’ll take it.”

Nizar considers it before deciding to address a previous concern. He wishes to know how she’ll react to the idea. “The Slytherin bias you gained was something your subconscious would have picked up on, one crafted with both the truth of Wizarding Britain’s political climate and by subtle means. How many Gryffindor staff work in this school?”

Pomona gives him an odd look. “Seven, I believe, if you’re counting the Headmaster.”

“Ravenclaw?”

That takes a moment longer. “The same number, I suppose.”

“Hufflepuff?”

She’s beginning to frown. “Five of us, and that I’m certain of, even if my status is honorary for becoming Hufflepuff’s Head of House.”

Nizar nods. “And before I literally fell out of a painting, how many staff in this school were of Slytherin House?”

Pomona narrows her eyes as he makes his point. “Just the one. Only Severus. I always thought there was a lack of interest, or a lack of those with the proper credentials.”

“No. Salazar, on his search for staff to try to fill the gaps in the Hogwarts curriculum, has been doing quite a bit of digging for those with the talent, education, and desire to teach, both in Britain and abroad. There are a number of Slytherins who meet the requirements. While there have been almost no other staff openings since Albus Dumbledore became Headmaster, not *once* was a Slytherin considered to take on a year of Defence. In fact, the *only* Slytherin during Dumbledore’s tenure to hold the post aside from myself was Dolores Umbridge, a deliberate Ministry plant—and she chose the task herself rather than allow another the role.”

Pomona lets out a snort. “Sorry, I know the seriousness of what we’re discussing, and even what you’re implying. I just find myself so bloody relieved to discover that woman was not a Hufflepuff! I’d pegged her for one due to her blind loyalty to that idiot Minister Fudge, Ministry law, and her set idea on how good little students should behave.”

“Alas, she is a Slytherin, and a terrible example of one at that,” Nizar replies in amusement. “She came into the Common Room at age eleven acting just as vile as what you experienced from her for the first part of the term.”

“I don’t like to think that some children are born to be bad eggs, but she and You-Know-Who certainly put that to the test, don’t they?” Pomona sounds saddened by that.

“Not to mention Bellatrix Black Lestrange. Mad as a bloody Hatter, and like Tom Riddle, probably performed her first murder while still a student in this castle,” Nizar says. “But Barty Crouch Junior was a Ravenclaw, so the bad egg syndrome certainly isn’t limited to Slytherin.”

Pomona chuckles. “Bad Egg Syndrome. Oh, I like that quite a bit.” Then she soberes. “You believe Albus did that deliberately—kept other Slytherin adults out of Hogwarts.”

“Unfortunately, yes. Dumbledore has his own Slytherin bias, one he claims to have overcome, but evidence says otherwise.”
“Is that why your brother dug up the original school charter and made certain Albus was aware of his limitations?” Pomona asks.

“Partly, but also because Dumbledore truly was taking on tasks that were never meant to be his. The control of this school in regards to the students and their education was always meant to be under the control of the four Heads of House, those holding Hogwarts’ magical seats. The Head Teacher’s role is politics and administration, a role that Godric founded himself when we realized the need for that separate political function.”

Pomona nods thoughtfully. “Do you want to oust Albus, then?”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Believe it or not? No. As long as he confines himself to what his job as Headmaster is meant to be, he’s good at it. Unfortunately, our desire to restructure Hogwarts back to her old standards of education has given my brother quite the stumbling block in that regard.”

Pomona is a lot wilier than she is often given credit for; she catches on at once. “It’s Albus’s reputation, isn’t it?”

Nizar sighs. “It is. He has spent so long playing the part of a harmless and potentially hapless fool in order to soothe the fears of others that no one wishes to be employed by him—no one sensible, anyway. It’s our current hope that Dumbledore’s actions during this war might unburden himself of that reputation, as it is certainly not the time to play at being harmless and foolish. If it does not, then…” Nizar rubs the bridge of his nose. “It isn’t my decision; the four Heads of House must be in agreement. That being said, I don’t want to get rid of someone who really does know what they’re doing, but if we can’t gain the staff to fill the teaching positions this school needs, there won’t be much choice.”

Pomona sips at her milky tea, brow wrinkled in thought. “I do understand those concerns, you know. I always thought it a bit odd that Hogwarts’ curriculum was so limited. My school enforces classes on writing, language, and sums until they’re certain you understand them. Then you’re free to focus on magical studies alone, though most of my classmates stuck it out with at least one or two Muggle subjects until graduation. There is a bit less separation in Ireland than there is in Britain, so it’s best to be educated in the mundane if you’re going to fit in.”

“What about you?” Nizar asks, smiling.

“Oh, I never fit in at home, nor much of anywhere unless it’s a garden or a greenhouse,” Pomona replies, a brief grin crossing her weathered face. “I did finish up a full course in French, though. Made it a bit easier to teach the Beauxbatons students last year. Less chance of a misunderstanding, and thus less chance of mishaps with the more dangerous plants. The Durmstrang students weren’t a difficulty, despite the language barrier—a lot of them come from lands where the temperature is too cold to support Britain’s sort of dangerous magical botany, and thus they were bloody leery of almost every single plant they encountered!”

Nizar is glad that their conversation was enough to ease her fears. When the elves clear the table of everything but the tea tray, Pomona rolls up the sleeve of her left arm without needing to be asked. “I’m the rare leftie witch,” she confides with another grin. “Oh, but didn’t that drive everyone to distraction!”

“There are some really ridiculous ideas regarding left-handed folklore and bad luck out there, yes,” Nizar agrees absently, his mind already on the magic of the castle and the strong lines of energy Pomona resonates. She isn’t an Earth-Speaker, nor a Wood-Speaker, but her magic runs very close to the potential for both. Sometimes it happens that way, Salazar once said; a magician is born with near-complete understanding, but lacks the full connection to their strongest magical aspect.
“That tickles a bit,” Pomona comments midway through the process. “Is that normal?”

“It’s different for everyone, though you’re the first one to complain of tickling,” Nizar murmurs. It’s so interesting, this elemental division. With all four Seats occupied, two are held by those with strong ties to the earth, and two are held with strong ties to the air. Filius with his unusual heritage; Pomona with her strength in earth and plant life; Severus with his ability to fly without a broom; Minerva’s love of broom flight, though she doesn’t indulge nearly as often as Nizar thinks she should. Neither does Severus, for that matter.

The Keepers, the Founders, brought more balance. Salazar was of the earth, Rowena loved the wind and high places, Helga was fond of great bodies of water, and Godric kept a flame burning in any room he occupied. It makes Nizar wonder what might be on the horizon where such concentrations of earth and air are needed, or if it’s merely a coincidence.

*There are no coincidences, little brother. Absolutely none.*

Nizar’s brow furrows. That is Salazar speaking, but he can’t recall when those words were said. They also have the ring of truth to them.

Great.

He leans back in his chair after Pomona has departed to ready herself for her next class. It hasn’t yet been a full month since Filius was tied into the school’s magic—not quite three weeks, in fact. He didn’t realize that Hogwarts’ magic would so rapidly claim the man, but then, perhaps he should have. Filius might only be half-Goblin, and they’ve always had a strong connection to the earth, and the earth is what gives Hogwarts her strength.

He is out of time to contemplate it; his third-year Slytherin and Gryffindor students will be arriving for their practical set in a few minutes. Nizar rises from his chair and immediately wobbles in place as his sense of balance deserts him.

“What the fuck?” Nizar blurts aloud. He gives up on a failing endeavor and drops down onto his knees on the sitting room rug. His head is swimming, his thoughts trying to scatter like seeds being taken away by the wind.

*Oh. Oh, you idiot,* Nizar thinks in dismayed realization. *You tied the fourth Head of House to the Northern Seat. All four of them are in place. It’s her. It’s Hogewáþ!*

“Father?” Elfric calls from his portrait, using the English term.

“Elfric. Go fetch your uncle,” Nizar says, and then blanks out on the sitting room.

No. He doesn’t want this, not right now. The timing is bad, and he has no idea what memory is slotting itself back into place until he’s living it.

Rowena. Rowena looking pale and gaunt, the silver in her hair far more pronounced than it had been even six months ago. “Hello, Nizar.”

“Good evening, Rowena.” Nizar studies her from the confines of the painting, and an ill feeling steals into his heart. “What’s wrong?”

“Myrddin once said that it is given to any great magician to know when their end approaches,” Rowena says quietly, her gaze never wavering from his. “I strongly feel that when I go to sleep tonight, I will not wake in the morning. Before that event comes to pass, I wished to say goodbye to my dear friend.”
Nizar swallows, heartache gripping him in a merciless vise. Helga’s cancer is worsening; they truly thought she would be the first of them to pass on from this world. “You’re certain?”

“That I wished to say farewell?” Rowena’s lips quirk in her familiar smile, wry and wise. “Of course I am.”

Perhaps there should be some other words to speak, some other emotional outpouring, but though Nizar loves Rowena, and she him, their relationship has always been a dance of formalities. “Then I hope you rest well beneath the sheltering branches of Baduhenna’s tree,” he whispers.

Rowena smiles. “Please tell Alicia not to grieve too long for me. I’ve made my peace with this world.”

“And Edvard?” Nizar asks, curious.

Rowena lifts a silvering brow. “Helena’s murderer can find his own peace, if there is any for him to be had. I myself am not that merciful.”

Some of the vise eases, though he suspects it will return soon enough. “If Baduhenna grants you a bow in your next life, I hope it is a fine one.”

Rowena is definitely pleased by that. “Thank you, Nizar. May the many years that you witness be peaceful ones, and when the foul one brings war to this school’s doorstep after your freedom, do show him exactly what the Protectoris is capable of.”

When a red-eyed Sedemai brings him the news of Rowena’s passing the next morning, Nizar is grieved anew, but not surprised. Sedemai suspects that he might have had warning, but does not ask questions of him, speaking of the need to attend to preparations for sending Rowena’s body home to her duchy in Bavaria.

It is the fifteenth day of Martius in the year 1040. Rowena of Raven’s Claw lived upon this earth for eighty-six years.

Twice that number still would not have been long enough.

Nizar shakes himself out of the memory to find himself still on his own floor. “How long?” he gasps in desperation. This rising wave of Hogwarts’ waking magic is not yet done with him.

“A few seconds only,” Brice answers. “Elfric is still looking for Uncle—”

Then he is down again, and this time Nizar knows it will be so much worse. This will be pain that hurts almost as much as fucking Utredus the Gaunt’s Obliviscaris omnia.

Godric and Sedemai are standing before the painting, their expressions full of such sadness that even a magical artist would struggle to capture the depth of it. “It’s nearly time,” Godric murmurs. “We’ll need to take your painting from the wall and bring you to her, Nizar. She is no longer capable of making the journey on her own.”

Helga. They mean Helga.

“You can move this painting safely?” Nizar asks in a desperate bid for distraction.

“For those of us tied to Hogewáþ’s magic properly, yes,” Sedemai answers, and gives Nizar a faint smile before she reaches up to grasp his portrait frame in its place above the hearth. “I am strongly tied to Godric, Nizar, and that strength has only grown as the years pass. If need be, I could act in his
“Right. Yes. Godric, you leave this frame on this wall,” Nizar orders, his voice shaking.

“I’ll be doing no such thing,” Godric retorts. Nizar can feel it when the painting detaches from stone, but otherwise there is no sensation of anything wrong.

“Godric Grypusdor, I do not wish to do this!” Nizar protests, swearing as the floor beneath his feet tilts, He stumbles over and grasps onto the nearest wall. He has never experienced an earthquake, but thinks this is probably a good approximation of one.

“I didn’t take you for a coward, Nizar,” Godric says, though Nizar can’t see him any longer. Both he and Sedemai are supporting the painting on both sides as they walk. It’s both reassuring and exceptionally odd that Nizar can feel their magic through the touch of their hands upon the wooden frame.

“I am absolutely a coward, a complete fraidy cat, and I think I would rather eat bricks than witness this!” Nizar retorts.

“Fraidy cat? You’ve slipped into your odd modern English again,” Godric tells him. “I don’t know that term, but can certainly guess the meaning!”

“Nizar, Dearest.” Sedemai’s voice is gentle where Godric’s is rough, but grief often leaves Godric in a temper of late. “Think not of yourself in this moment. She has asked for you. Do it for her.”

Nizar closes his eyes as he continues to cling to the wall. Damn Sedemai for knowing exactly what to say to convince him. “All right. But if I get pissed within my own painting afterwards, I blame the pair of you.”

“Nizar, much like the loss of Findláech, I believe all of us may come down to the Slytherin-claimed sitting room to join you in your cups,” Godric mutters.

They take him up to the ground floor. Nizar feels the ley line that connects the painting to the castle’s magic at his back, as if it is unspooling to follow him for the entire journey. There are more paintings on the walls now, and most of them take note of him as he passes, or shout greetings that he is not really in the mood to return. Then they are standing before Helga’s stairs to her chosen underground home. Nizar cannot discern scents save those within the painting, but if something has presence enough, he can sense it. What he feels now is the thickness of medicinal herbs and potions, along with a great deal of mint—attempts to keep the air clear and breathable for those that might be struggling.

When he is taken into Helga’s sleeping chamber, she is alone but for Theodora Grypusdor, successor to Helga as holder of the school’s Northern Seat. The moment her parents enter the room with the portrait, she excuses herself. Nizar catches just enough of a glimpse of her face to see the tears she is trying valiantly to wipe away.

Nizar’s heart clenches. Helga’s eyes are closed, but he would not call that sleep so much as the unconscious repose of a body losing its fight to survive. The fucking illness has taken so much from her—the golden shine of her hair, the strength of her body, the core of her magic. She will hold onto what she has left until her very last breath, but to deprive a vǫlva so is just…Nizar has no words. He has only grief and rage on her behalf.

“We’re leaving you here for now,” Sedemai says. The painting is propped on something level with Helga’s bed, possibly a chair, given the faint sense of tilting beneath Nizar’s feet. “She wished to
speak to you alone, and we’ll not deny her that.”

“Thank you,” Nizar says, even if he’d rather avoid this entirely. He also wonders if they are going to make him bid farewell to Godric in the same fashion, or if Godric will slip free of his body in the night without warning, much the same as he used to slip from the castle for his runs through the forest.

When the heavy door closes behind Godric and Sedemai, Helga opens her eyes. They are no longer the blue of a northern winter sky, but watery, much more like melting ice. “Hello, dearest litli bróðir.”

Even her voice is faint, riddled with cracks like a chasm beginning to open beneath their feet. “Hello, dearest eldri systir,” Nizar whispers. “I never wished to see you this way. I know that is selfish, but —”

“Nizar, I never wished to see myself this way,” Helga says wryly. She draws in a deeper breath when the words nearly drift off into nothing. She is pulling her strength together, fighting for this last conversation between them with as much fierceness as she has fought for everything else.

“Then we’re even.” Nizar thinks on it before stepping forward, sitting down in the front-most part of the sitting room. He does not know what this disease has done to her vision, but he won’t force her to seek out a much smaller figure in a stupid blasted painting. He bites his lip and asks, “Are you afraid?”

Helga smiles. “No, I am not afraid of dying, merely frustrated by the long path it has taken me to reach this point. I know that at last, it will be soon. It will be a relief, dearest.” She pauses. “I have never asked you, as it never seemed necessary. Do you fear death?”

Nizar shakes his head. “I only fear dying for the wrong reasons. I have two children awaiting me on the other side of the veil you speak of, just as the hall of your kin waits for you.”

“It will good to see my mother and father again, and my sister,” Helga muses. “Though I hope they have not adopted the Christian idea of forgiveness in the meantime. I am still angry with Sigurd.”

“Who isn’t?” Nizar responds, and Helga lets out faint breaths of laughter. After the debacle that was Sigurd’s support of the High King of Ireland, assistance that led to the deaths of Sigurd, many of his men from Orkney, and many of the Gaels on the isle, he isn’t inclined to think kindly of Helga’s brother, no matter that he otherwise had proven himself a capable ruler. Granted, given the words he has heard among the students who visit the dungeon sitting room, the Orkney Isles might well decide to name Sigurd a saint. He rather hopes they skip that step.

“Nizar…the reason I asked you here.” Helga turns her head on her pillow in slow increments until she can gaze at him properly. There are lines of pain on her face. Salazar, no matter his genius, had never been able to truly rid her of the agony the illness caused. Helga had finally asked him to cease trying, not wishing him to spend so much of his time on a doomed task.

“Yes?” Nizar expects a favor, or perhaps Helga simply wants to remind him that he should wring Albus Dumbledore’s aging neck on Hallowe’en of 1995. Instead, she shocks him.

“I know what Salazar is truly up to,” Helga says, smiling. “I know that he will be there with you when it is time for your freedom once more.”

“How can you be so certain he succeeds?” Nizar asks, raising both eyebrows. “I do seem to recall a bit of ranting from you regarding fools and fool’s errands.”
“I’ve had quite a bit of time to reflect upon things, and the ceiling overhead becomes quite dull after mere hours, let alone days.” Helga sighs, but it is a note of pleasure, not pain. “It was your certainty, dearest, yours and his. Perhaps it was magical instinct and Divination that told you when that painting had to be completed, but Salazar…he knew exactly how long he could stay, and exactly when to depart. Did you know him already, dearest?”

“No. Not…” Nizar swallows. “Sal is the one who sent me here, Helga. I didn’t know his identity at the time—not for years. Not until 1017. He started to look like the one who’d saved my life. He had also told me, before my departure from 1995, that I would return. That is where our certainty came from.”

Helga smiles again. “You are each other’s beginning, and each other’s end. Your lives have become a circle. I think that fitting, and beautiful.”

“Beautiful?”

Helga’s head moves in a vague nod. “Yes. I don’t think I have words left to me to describe what I mean. The two of you…I am so glad he will see Hogewáp again.”

“I hope he does. I don’t…beyond that single event, nothing is certain,” Nizar says.

“Nothing ever is, dearest. Not life, not death, not magic. Not even what lies beyond the veil of our world,” Helga murmurs.

Nizar irritably wipes at his face when tears find him at last. “The loss of you hurts already, and I suspect it will hurt worst of all of us save Salazar. Why is that? Why is it not equal grief for every bit of family I stand to lose?”

Helga considers it. “To you, I was mother, sister, confidant, and friend. We fought in so many battles with our backs to the other, having faith and trust that we both had the skill to survive. I gave you my aid when vengeance filled your heart, just as you once granted me the same.

“We care for all those around us, dearest. I think it is because we are so very much alike.”

Nizar wipes his face again. “Perhaps so.” He certain cannot argue that they are both rather bloodthirsty individuals when it comes to turning their wands and their wrath upon the deserving. “I will miss you.”

Helga lifts her arm and shakily presses her hand to her breast. “I will always be here for you, dearest, even when life and death separate us.” She takes a shuddering breath, her eyes sliding closed of their own accord. “When you see my soul-weary bróðir again, remember me to him, and remind him of my love.”

Nizar presses his hand against the canvas that separates them. “I will. I promise.”

She does not pass that night, not as Rowena did when she was certain of her impending death. Helga lives to see the first day of summer, to smell the flowers of the Highlands one more time as she listens to the stories the students tell her of the Beltane fires.

Helga dies on eighth Maius in 1044. Nizar thinks she had made attaining the age of seventy-five a personal goal, a final challenge to meet.

He listens to the preparation for her pyre, one that will be held on the lake near the castle that was her home for nearly sixty years. Helga was loved even by some of their most irritable of students, and he doesn’t see a dry eye in the sitting room for days.
Godric does come down to drink with him. Nizar lifts a flask of distilled alcoholic bliss in silent toast, a gesture Godric mimics.

He is the only one of the Four who remains. Nizar does not envy him that.

When Nizar again shakes himself free of insistent memory and Hogewáþ’s magic, he discovers he is being held by Salazar. That confuses him for a moment until he realizes he is also sobbing his fucking heart out.

Well. He has reason enough.

“What the bloody hell happened?” Salazar demands when Nizar is able to calm himself enough to breathe without choking on stupid tears. “Elfric came to fetch me in a panic!”

“Oh. Well.” Nizar searches his robe pockets until he comes up with a handkerchief and tries to clean his face. “I tied Pomona Sprout into Hogwarts’ magic, and didn’t quite expect such an immediate response.”

“Strong magic,” Salazar whispers, wide-eyed in realization. “Are you all right?”

“It wasn’t black out recollections, not this time. I almost wish it had been,” Nizar replies. His handkerchief is already a sodden mess, and his nose still needs assistance. He takes a breath and lets it out before giving the castle’s magic a gentle prod. That rising tide has crested and broke, for now, though he suspects Hogwarts will continue to grow stronger as the days progress. “I’m fine. I don’t think I wanted to recall Rowena and Helga’s deaths, but I’m not—fuck, my class!” Nizar exclaims as he recalls the time.

“Being watched over by your Severus,” Salazar hurries to reassure him. “Though I daresay he will be much more even-tempered when he knows that you’re not in the midst of expiring.”

“Gods, those poor third-years,” Nizar says, trying to smile. It isn’t his most confident, but it doesn’t feel false, either.

“Rowena and Helga?” Salazar asks gently.

“Oh. Uhm.” Nizar Vanishes the handkerchief to the laundry hamper in his bathroom and tries to find another. He never carries just the one; it has to be in his pockets bloody somewhere. “Rowena knew when she was going to die, so she came to say farewell. She…it was peaceful for her, Sal. I think she still would have preferred to find Edvard’s body and return him to life just to grind him back into death with the heel of her boot, but she was…it was all right.”

Salazar’s eyes are dark with grief. “Helga was not, was it?”

“No. She asked to speak to me, ten days before she died. That was when I learned that as long as one was properly bound to Hogwarts’ magic, my painting could be safely moved—though I really didn’t prefer it. I suspect it only happened twice more.” Godric and Sedemai, he thinks. He certainly would not have been able to journey in a portrait to Winchester, much as he would have wished to see Galiena again before her death.

“She figured it out, Sal,” Nizar says, smiling. “That was why she wanted to speak with me alone. She’d had too much time with her thoughts, and knew you’d be lurking about, waiting for me here.”

Salazar blinks a few times and lets out a startled laugh. “Oh, gods, but somehow I am not surprised. Helga was quite the Slytherin in her way of thinking.”
“She said…” Nizar rests his hands on Salazar’s shoulders. “She asked me to remember her to you, and to remind you that she loves your idiotic arse.”

Nizar is startled when Salazar flings his arms around him and embraces Nizar so tightly, it’s almost difficult to breathe. “Thank you,” he says in a choked voice. “Thank you for telling me that. There have been times in my life that I’ve thought I heard her voice, but to hear those words is a kindness granted that I never again thought to have.”

“You’re welcome.” Nizar hugs him back, grateful to Helga no matter the pain that memory brought him. For some reason, Salazar needed to know he’d still held a place in Helga’s heart. He doesn’t know why, but he’s glad it could be done.
Chapter Summary

Nearly everyone learns something new before Wednesday is done with them. Not that this is necessarily viewed as a good thing.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, guys. <3 Extra chapter, as promised.

Severus is almost worse than Salazar when it comes to ascertaining Nizar’s well-being. He insists upon inspecting Nizar from head to toe in Nizar’s office while the students are preoccupied with Salazar’s version of teaching.

“Memory?” Severus asks when he is satisfied that Nizar isn’t in danger of expiring. While Nizar appreciates some of Severus’s methods of exploration, he didn’t need to be quite that distracted before facing a classroom of prurient teenagers. If that goes much further, he won’t be able to think, let alone teach.

“Yes. True ones, not blank bits of missing time, but I would very much prefer to discuss them later.” Nizar frowns when Severus opens his mouth to argue the point. “I mean it. I’ve already destroyed two handkerchiefs this afternoon, and I’d rather not obliterate another so soon.”

Severus cups his face with one hand and gently brushes the edge of Nizar’s nose with his thumb. “I suspected you might have. What the hell did you tell Salazar? When the two of you came into your classroom, he looked like someone had removed his insides and then put them back incorrectly.”

“I needed to pass on a message, and he needed to hear it,” Nizar says. “That doesn’t mean it was easy for him, but I think it was necessary.”

Severus nods, appeased. “Please, no more dramatics? It still hasn’t been a week since I watched you run into a burning fucking house, and then you try to have a brainstorm in your own quarters.”

Nizar snorts. “Severus, I promise to the best of my ability not to be a continuous disaster for the remainder of this week.”

Severus stills and then glares at him. “God dammit! I didn’t word that properly at all!”

Nizar grins back. “You’ll have to try harder next time.”

Severus raises an eyebrow before his eyes gain the faint metallic shimmer of color that Nizar loves to see. “No, I think I will be doing that right now.”

Nizar gasps at the warm hand that presses against his groin. “Uh—class. Occurring right now. Teaching—oh, fuck,” he whimpers as a button and zipper are undone with speedy efficiency. “Severus!”
“I know that your office is sealed against traveling sounds unless it’s a knock upon that door. Now do shut the fuck up,” Severus orders, and takes Nizar’s prick into his mouth.

Nizar grips the edge of his desk and tries not to fall directly to the floor. He would never have chosen to do this on his own, not so soon after grief, but Severus is a bloody genius. He did need this. It’s a reminder, a reconnection, and gods, he is going to come apart in moments if Severus continues to suck on him like that.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Nizar repeats, squeezing his eyes shut as Severus’s hot tongue teases the underside of his prick. It’s the slightest graze of teeth on the sensitive head that sends him gasping over the edge, coming into Severus’s mouth while Severus digs his fingers into the curve of Nizar’s arse.

“What the fuck?” Nizar says when he thinks he can language again. Wait; that was not English. That was Pictish. “What the fuck, Severus?” Better.

Severus looks up at him, lips curved in a smug smile that a cat might envy. “I wanted to do that, you needed it done, and if you weren’t such a ridiculously responsible adult, I would be fucking you in this office right now.”

“That is not how you encourage me to go out there and do my job!”

Severus continues to smile as he tucks Nizar back into his pants, pulls up the zipper, and fastens the button of Nizar’s trousers. “Perhaps not, but it is encouragement for you to join me this evening after my office hours are done. I would very much like to take advantage of the quiet before Voldemort decides to irritate the whole of Britain with his presence.”

Nizar smiles. “Then I’ll be certain to seek you out, as I am happy to be taken advantage of.”

“What were the two of you doing in there?” Miss Vane asks in suspicion when they emerge from his office together.

Nizar eyes her. “We were gossiping over your lousy Potions marks.”

Miss Vane scowls. “You were not!”

Severus gives her a dry look. “You may wish to review your homework, Miss Vane,” he suggests, and then Disapparates with the loud crack that is typical of Apparition in this time. Nizar knows that Severus is trying to figure out silent Apparition, and is waiting for the day when Severus attempts to trade for the knowledge of how to accomplish it.

Of course, Nizar would accept bribery, too.

“Now that the interruption to our day is over and done with…” Nizar makes certain he has his third-year class’s full attention—well, except for the Carrow twins. They attend only so they don’t receive yet more detentions, but he can’t force the two young idiots to listen. “How many of you know how to swim?” All of them raise their hands, though some seem more confident than others. “Good. You’re already well ahead of the curve in comparison to myself. I didn’t learn until I was sixteen.”

“Why so late, Professor?” Astoria asks.

“No opportunity was granted to me to learn previously. However, it isn’t merely swimming we’re to discuss. This is a Defence class, after all,” Nizar says, and several of his more intuitive students begin to look apprehensive. “Say you need a swift escape, or a place to hide from an enemy, and your only option is the nearest body of water. How long can you hold your breath?”
“Probably not long enough,” Mohammad answers him. He has more reason than everyone else in class—Astoria Greengrass aside—to be concerned with escape.

“The general average, with practice, is about two minutes—and that is a practiced average, not the norm,” Nizar stresses. “A more typical average would be less than a minute. That is not usually enough time for the person you’re hiding from to lose interest in seeking you. That being the case, how can you stay beneath the water longer?”

“Er, gillyweed, sir,” Black says after Nizar acknowledges him. “It’s what Harry Potter used during the Triwizard Tournament’s Second Task last year. I was curious, so I looked it up afterwards. Gillyweed gives you gills, and that should give you plenty of time to hide if you’re breathing water instead of air.”

“Yes and no,” Nizar replies. “The first difficulty of gillyweed is that you have to chew it up and swallow it, which is about as joyful as chewing up an ocean-faring giant snail. The second difficulty is finding it; unless you’re fortunate enough to find it growing along your escape route, or are paranoid to keep a jar of it on you at all times, you won’t have it to rely on. The third difficulty with gillyweed is that it only lasts an hour. After that hour, you need air once more. If that hasn’t granted you enough time for your enemy to move on…”

“Viktor Krum did that neat partial self-Transfiguration into a shark,” Daley suggests next. “It worked well enough for him.”

“You need to be skilled at Transfiguration to pull that off, and by skilled I mean you should be able to do so in seconds. You shouldn’t assume you’ll have the time to sit and concentrate.” Nizar thinks about it. “It isn’t a bad solution, if you’ve the skill. It would be more effective to learn to become an Animagus, and from there learn to control your Animagus form so you become whatever you need, not whatever it is you begin with.”

“You can do that?” Suri asks in surprise. “I thought an Animagus only had one form!”

“Yes, and sadly, too many people have forgotten that aspect of Animagi,” Nizar answers. “When you achieve your first Animagus transformation, the animal you become is either one you feel a strong kinship with, or one that is very much like you in regards to their physical and mental traits, as well as their abilities.”

Takagi raises his hand next. “You’re a Metamorphmagus, sir. Can you use that ability to spend long periods of time underwater?”

“After I remembered how? Yes, I can do so, though shifting lungs to gills is…” Nizar makes a displeased, unhappy face that causes most of his students to laugh. “It is not a comfortable sensation.”

“Then I suppose the safest option for the rest of us would be the Bubble-Head Charm,” Miss Sibazaki says. “That’s what Fleur Delacour used. It wasn’t the charm that failed her—she just didn’t know what to do about the Grindylows in the Black Lake.”

“It’s a shame no one warned her,” Nizar says.

“That would be cheating, sir,” Miss Whitehead retorts in a pompous tone.

Nizar snorts. “Cheating in the Triwizard Tournament has been a tradition since the stupid tournament first began. Miss Sibazaki is correct in regards to the charm. Thus, today you are all going to get wet, as it’s time to properly learn the Bubble-Head Charm.”
“Are we going into the Black Lake?” Miss Vane squawks in horror.

Nizar nudges the magic of his classroom. Within the blink of an eye, they are all standing in two feet of water. “No. Why?”

The Gryffindors and Slytherins glance at each other, though shorter Mitcham looks exceptionally displeased to find himself in thigh-deep water. “Er, no reason, sir,” Daley says.

“So we’re just going to...learn the charm, then lie down in the water and test it,” Black says doubtfully.

“Better to be in water you can easily sit up in than to practice in deep water,” Nizar points out. “Now. Let’s begin. The incantation is *Tutela Bulla in Aerem*.” He waits for them to repeat it properly. “After you’ve mastered the basic charm, I’ll teach you the variant that gives you only a bubble over your face instead of wearing an entire bubble over your head.”

He isn’t free from class responsibilities until after he hosts a different water session for his first-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. At five o’clock, his classroom is empty, and nothing else is expected of him until the dinner hour begins at six.

Nizar is digging through his storage trunk in his quarters when one of the 995 portraits coughs to gain his attention. “You’ve company, Nizar,” Godric says. “Good evening, Severus.”

“Good evening,” Severus replies politely. “I came to make certain this one planned to attend dinner instead of distracting himself.”

“I am not *that* distracted.” Nizar grins when he finds what he was looking for in the trunk’s magically expanded depths. He really needs to get around to sorting the contents of this trunk. “I needed to find a map.”

“What sort of map?” Severus asks, following him out to the sitting room.

Nizar unrolls the parchment and spreads it out on the table, tapping the corners to pin it in place with magic. “I’ve had concerns about Hogsmeade and the Dementors since we learned of their absence from Azkaban,” he explains. On the map, he points out the castle that appears to represent Hogewáþ. It isn’t as large as the castle today, reflecting the school as it was in his time. The Heights of Brae appear, and then the cluster of tiny buildings and pasturelands labeled as Castleview.

The rest of the map is filling itself in as well, names and lands held in trust by other lords under King Findláech of Moray, but Nizar is only concerned with the uneven black border that surrounds the school, the Heights, and the village. “This is the land that Findláech granted to Godric, naming him Earl over the Heights in response to King Æthelred’s badly worded request. That made him the only earl in the north unless you went among the jarls of the Norse, which Godric always thought was rather awkward. When Queen Elizabeth granted me Godric’s old title, she kept to the original lands, which is everything within this border.”

Severus studies the map, a faint frown on his face. “That looks to be approximately ten square miles. Is it possible to ward that much land?”

“With wards similar to what protects Hogwarts? Not without a lot of work that we don’t have time to perform. It would take months.” Nizar runs his hand along the boundary line again, using the map to gain a translated sense of how to find the edge of his granted lands once he’s outside. “But if I walk the border of the lands, I’ll know if I can at least keep the Dementors out.”

Nizar releases the magical hold on the map and rolls it up again for proper storage. “My only
difficulty is that I don’t know what a fucking Dementor is even like. Intent will take me far in regards to warding the land against them, but it won’t be a certainty.”

“I could show you in your Pensieve,” Severus offers.

Nizar taps the map against his arm. “Later,” he decides. “I’ve already put off walking this boundary line for too long. I’d rather accomplish it before dinner.”

“That is a long line to walk,” Severus points out. “You said you wouldn’t be skiving off of dinner, Nizar.”

“I won’t be. I’ll be riding a thestral.”

Severus gives him a blank stare before rubbing his forehead. “Riding a thestral. Of course. Why did I not think of that?”

“Because you didn’t know that riding a magical animal means that you can maintain your sense of the magic in the earth, and thus it’s a faster journey than following the trace of that magic on foot?” Nizar grins when Severus glares at him. “Come on. I haven’t ridden a thestral in ages, and they’re far preferable to a horse.”

“You didn’t get on with horses, then?” Severus asks as Nizar returns the map to its current home in the trunk.

“They hated me,” Nizar says. “I decided to hate them right back. I still wonder what became of the stables, though. It’s the only building from my time that’s missing from the school grounds.”

“Given that it was actually a matter of pride for Pure-bloods to show off their wealth via horse-drawn carriages up until the end of the nineteenth century?” Severus shakes his head. “I’ve no idea. Rubeus might be aware.”

“That’s a good point. I’ll ask him the next time I have a spare breath for tea.” Nizar digs a thick woolen blanket out of the storage trunk. Organizing, dear gods, he has got to organize this thing properly! “Though really, we won’t miss dinner. I think I’ll only have time to ride the first half of it, but that should still give me a better idea of whether I’m capable of warding the land against Dementors.”

“We.” Severus raises an eyebrow when Nizar glances at him in surprise. “I have zero intentions of riding a thestral, but our idiot Headmaster has a point about departing school grounds by oneself.”

Nizar smiles. “You’re just worried that I’ll do something incredibly Gryffindor.”

Severus doesn’t smile in response. “Perhaps I am just concerned that Voldemort might return to the unshielded lands around this school, given that he is capable of reading newspapers and deducing facts from them, Earl over the Heights.”

“Stop calling me that, or I’ll start calling you by your war mage title.” Nizar chuckles when Severus looks absolutely disgusted by the idea. “Should I fetch a spare blanket, then? Thestrals have bony backsides.”

“No. I am capable of flying.” Severus’s expression conveys his absolute lack of desire to ever ride a horse-like creature. “Besides, a thestral is invisible to most, so I strongly suggest you should be, as well, or there will possibly be many confused Muggles beyond the bounds of Hogsmeade.”

“And you’ll be invisible too, then.” Nizar nods. “Sensible.” He holds out his hand, waits for Severus
to accept his grasp, and Apparates them directly to the middle of the Forbidden Forest. The thestral herd is nearby, in a darker part of the wood—away from the giant fucking spiders. Severus waits at the edge of the grove while Nizar walks among the thestrals, being greeted, sniffed, and occasionally nipped at as he searches for one that is patient enough to walk that far without launching into flight. He finally chooses a mare that seems older than the others, if no taller; there is a tear in her wing that wouldn’t keep her from flight, but would certainly mean she wouldn’t prefer it.

“Well, hello there,” Nizar murmurs, tossing the woolen blanket onto the thestral’s back. She turns her head to sniff at it before regarding him with disdain. “Look, it is not my fault that your spine is ridged like rocks,” Nizar responds crossly, and then hoists himself up into place when the thestral snorts and gives up. He thinks she must pull the school carriages often, or she would be far less patient about the entire affair.

“Ready?” Severus asks. Nizar glances in that direction, but there is nothing to be seen. He has already cast the Invisibility Charm, so Nizar does the same. Now anyone with the ability might see a curious thestral wandering about, but Hogsmeade is used to rare creatures sometimes ambling through. It’s the small settlements beyond the village’s borders, the homes surrounding the Heights, that concern him.

Granted, this is the Highlands of Scotland. If a non-magical person sees a horse that looks like a skeleton trotting along, they will chalk it up to either the Fae, bad luck, good fortune, or keep a close watch on their loves ones, alert for someone’s impending death.

Nizar can find the magical border that marks the Heights of Brae easily, even astride the thestral. He nudges her in that direction. The thestral moves on without protest, folding her wings in close to her sides in a way Nizar appreciates. It will keep the wind from biting so much at his legs after they leave the shelter of the forest.

They’ve gone in silence for about a quarter of the journey, just emerging from the outer bounds of Hogsmeade, when Severus says, “I feel entirely ridiculous.” He is close enough to be easily heard, but Nizar doesn’t think he is in easy reach.

“Well, I certainly can’t tell you that you currently look ridiculous,” Nizar replies. He halts the thestral long enough to get a better sense of the border line again, and then continues on. “Would it help to talk about something?”

“Perhaps.” Severus is quiet as the thestral plods along, nosing at the ground as she, too, senses the magical boundary. “Dragon’s Breath of Life. How is it propagated?”

“Propagate,” Nizar repeats the unfamiliar term. “Propagare?”

“Yes.”

“It must bloom. The flowers are the key, as they hold either a single seed, or three seeds.” Nizar shivers when the wind blowing from the Heights seems to find its way right through his robes. Bloody unpredictable Scottish weather.

“Why is it one or three?” Severus asks. He is a bit closer now; on instinct, Nizar reaches out and touches Severus’s arm. Severus makes an amused sound and silently moves out of range.

“If the flower is not used for any purpose, it will bear only one seed, and if treated well, that seed will bear another plant.” Nizar casts a warming charm on his clothing in annoyance as the chill increases. “If the flower is harvested and properly used to save another’s life, what will remain in your hands after the magic has been spent will be not one seed, but three. By tradition, one seed could be kept to
brew a potion that would also act as a restorer of life, but it was less potent. The other two seeds were meant to be planted.

“A magical plant’s means to ensure that it survives.” Severus sounds annoyed. “The tradition wasn’t adhered to, was it? That’s why it went functionally extinct but for the single Preserved seed you gave me.”

“Exactly that. We warned people to stop, that soon there would be nothing left, but there were so many conflicts. So many wars.” Nizar nudges the thestral to the left to skirt one of the hills surrounding the greater Heights. It is technically off the boundary line, but that section is going directly through the hill. Nizar doesn’t feel it is necessary to dig his way along.

Through, but not over. Nizar glances at the hill again. For the original boundary line to now be so far beneath the soil, it must be a barrow that was placed over that spot, but it’s a far larger barrow than he’s used to seeing. It makes him wonder if any of the kings of this region are unaccounted for.

Then again, that is a barrow placed directly on top of a magical boundary, the nearest thing to a crossroads the locals might have had at the time. Nizar promptly decides to forget he ever noticed the barrow’s existence.

“That seed.” Severus sounds cautious. “You still had it because you used one of the flowers to save a life.”

“Yes. I don’t recall when. I remember that when I used a flower to save Fortunata’s life, I adhered to the tradition. One seed was for me, and is how Salazar taught me to brew that particular potion. The other two seeds were planted—”

“Nizar. Stop,” Severus instructs in a terse voice just as the thestral halts in a lurch that bruises Nizar’s sternum on her bony neck.

“What is it?” He glances around, but sees nothing more imposing than a spot of fog clouding the bottom of the valley ahead. It happens often, if the weather is right for it, but…

There are no other spots of fog in the lowland areas he can see. “Severus?”

“It’s a Dementor,” Severus answers quietly. He appears before Nizar’s eyes, standing at his side with one of his hands resting on the thestral’s flank. “I didn’t expect to see one so close to Hogwarts.”

“I’ve never seen one at all.” Nizar tilts his head from side to side, trying to catch a glimpse of something other than blob of fog. “Is that why it got colder?”

“Yes, though at first I attributed it to the bloody weather.” Severus fetches his wand from his sleeve and casts his Patronus. The iaculus does not launch itself forward, as Nizar half expects, but hovers over Severus’s head. “You’re still certain that is nothing like any creature you would have encountered or heard described in the Founders’ Era?”

“Absolutely.” Nizar blows out a long breath and steels himself. “Severus.”

“Please do not tell me you are about to be a fucking Gryffindor,” Severus says in warning.

“Then I won’t. I need to know what the fuck that is. A closer look will not kill me, not if you have a Patronus at the ready,” Nizar says.

Severus glares at him. “They are dangerous, Nizar. Worse, they are indestructible. They might fear a Patronus, but it will not destroy them.”
“Oh, now that’s fascinating.” Nizar dismounts the thestral, which refuses to take a step closer to that mound of fog. “I am going to walk closer, step by step. I want to get a better look at this supposedly indestructible terror. If you sense anything amiss, then by all means, please grant me the company of your iaculus.”

“Nizar. This is a stupid idea,” Severus grates out.

Nizar glances at him. “Severus, that fucking thing is trespassing on my land, which grants me a power over the situation that it doesn’t have. I’m not saying it can’t affect me, but the ability will be of assistance in learning more about these things.”

“They have ghostly bones for arms and they fucking eat souls,” Severus says flatly. “What else is there to learn?”

“How to make them fucking dead,” Nizar counters. Severus growls under his breath before inclining his head in a stiff, jerking nod. Point acknowledged, if hated.

He is halfway to the fogbank when he finally feels what others have described—not just the cold, but utter dread, as if light and joy is being leeched away. Nizar grits his teeth. That is informative, but gods, it’s unpleasant.

In two more steps, it has ripped forth a memory that leaves Nizar huddled on his knees, trying not to scream in rage.

A warm presence drives back the rage, the iaculus flitting before Nizar’s eyes as it is joined by Severus. “I warned you,” Severus whispers, immediately wrapping Nizar in his arms. “What did you see?”

“One of the first things I remembered of my life and children after waking from that painting was how Brice died,” Nizar spits, still trembling. Beneath that rage is hollow grief, and he cannot afford to wallow in that memory right now. Brice’s death was not his fault, nor the fault of Godric, or any teacher Brice ever had. It was fucking Drugo, and the memory of Drugo shrieking in thwarted anger and terror helps to drive back the cold. That is also educational, but Nizar is not yet certain how.

Nizar pulls his wand free, silently casts his Patronus, and hisses instruction all in the same breath. The basilisk rears up and all but leaps down into the valley, where it wraps itself around something within that fog that lets out a horrific, blood-curdling shriek.

“Oh, so there are benefits to a basilisk Patronus aside from causing others to wet their trousers,” Severus observes in a dry voice.

“I wasn’t certain if it would work. It does prove that they are at least semi-corporal.” Nizar stands back up, grasps Severus’s hand, and starts walking towards the Patronus-wrapped Dementor.

“Nizar. This is not a good idea.”

“Trust me,” Nizar murmurs, and then clears his throat and lets his voice ring out. “¡Intruso! I am Earl of these lands, Lord of the Heights of Brae, and you do not belong.”

The Dementor shrieks again, capable of recognizing the declaration of a magical title that grants Nizar the means to protect the Heights. The fog is clearing away as they approach, though the grass and rocks are all touched by sparkling frost. Nizar breathes out a plume of mist and scowls.

His Patronus is wrapped around a hooded form, one that looks like a spectral vision of a hooded and cloaked Executioner. Its robes are rags that move in tatters without wind to cause it. One of its
skeletal-like arms is grasping the Patronus, as if trying to pry it off, but not succeeding. Of its face, Nizar can see nothing. It’s as if there is no form at all within the confines of that ragged hood.

“I am lord of these lands,” Nizar repeats, “and Myrddin’s successor as war mage of this isle. You will speak to me, or you will cease to exist. I strongly suggest cooperating.”

There is a quiet, deadly pause. It feels like the lull in a battle that is about to become so much worse. “I will speak,” the Dementor finally hisses. Its voice is a distant echo, broken into pieces that barely form words.

“Excellent. What the fuck are you?” Nizar asks. Severus tightens his grip on Nizar’s hand; the iaculus Patronus glows brighter.

“I am a Dementor.”

“Well, that was a useless answer, if a true one.” Nizar decides he needs to be more specific, though he scarcely knows where to begin.

No. He knows exactly where to start. “There were no Dementors in my time. How did you come to exist?”

The Dementor makes a sound like a dragon’s scales sliding over stone. Nizar’s Patronus looks decidedly unimpressed and tightens its hold until the sound ceases.

“How did you come to exist?” Nizar repeats mercilessly.

“We were made,” the Dementor answers, and even those fading echoes are imbued with rage. “We were given form by Ekrizdis.”

Nizar doesn’t find the name familiar. “Who the hell is that?”

“Our Creator.” The Dementor scratches at the basilisk Patronus, which lets out a stream of irritated Parseltongue. Nizar feels like something within his own head goes dark in response, but he pushes back until the Dementor is cringing.

“You truly do not understand who you are fucking with,” Nizar tells the Dementor. “Severus?”

“In Wizarding history, Ekrizdis was either the one who discovered a hidden island off the English coast, or he created the island of Azkaban to suit his needs. Ekrizdis is recorded as the builder of the fortress that became the prison, and is known to have performed terrible crimes that saw him executed by the Wizengamot—one of the last times the Wizengamot openly cooperated with English royalty, I believe.”

Nizar nods. “I dreamed of Azkaban on Tuesday evening. Just a brief glimpse, but it seems as if it was a warning.”

“Which does explain your sudden need to patrol this border. Divination.” It’s the first time Nizar has ever heard Severus say that word without some hint of derision.

“It does, yes.” Nizar returns his attention to the trapped Dementor. Even captured, it has chilled the weather around them so much that it’s beginning to fucking snow.

It makes him think of a frozen lake, of crackling ice and a surrounding cloud of dread and death. He concentrates on it and can see the shapes of Dementors moving within that icy cloud.
“Is it Divination if I’m thinking of being surrounded by Dementors on a frozen shore, or is that memory?”

Severus gives him a sharp look. “Memory. That would be the time that you and Sirius Black were both nearly eaten by Dementors.”

“Ah. Did anyone ever discern why the child seemed to be Dementor-bait?” Nizar asks. “I don’t think we ever discussed it again after Fudge finally collected the fucking things and sent them back to Azkaban.”

“No. In retrospect, however…” Severus’s voice is tight with displeasure. “I would suspect the Horcrux.”

That is as good a place to start as any. “Why would you wish to eat a Horcrux? Or was it the child itself you and your ilk were after?”

“The soul shard was strong.” The Dementor’s voice is full of hunger and longing, which only makes the cold worsen. “The soul shard would have fed us well. The child would have been a delight. We are not often fed delights.”

Nizar makes a disgusted face. “Well, isn’t that creepy. Why did you desire to eat a strong shard of soul—no, forget that question. Why do you desire to eat any soul?”

“They nourish us!” The Dementor is actively struggling to escape now. It’s getting harder to maintain focus on his Patronus.

Nizar thinks on holding Severus in his arms, listening to the man declare that he never once thought he would ever be happy. It lightens his heart, and the basilisk glows with renewed strength. Better.

“Why does a soul nourish you?” Severus asks. He sounds stronger, as well—or perhaps he simply wants this over and done with so they are no longer flirting with danger via Dementor.

“I need not answer to you!”

“The hell you do. I am not Myrddin’s successor, no, but I am still Bellum dux Magum of Britain, and I also guard these lands!” Severus shouts. Nizar grins in joyful approval.

“We must consume what we are,” the Dementor hisses in rage. “That is how we feed, mages of war. We must eat what maintains us!”

“You consume what you are.” Nizar suddenly feels so ill he nearly vomits onto his own boots. “Oh. Oh, gods. Fuck. Fuck a sarding rabid badger!”

“Nizar?” Severus directs his iaculus to join the basilisk, which has faded to translucence from Nizar’s shock. “What’s wrong?”

“Ekrizdis was a Necromancer. I think that if we were to look back on the laws crafted against Necromancers in Britain, they will originate with him.” Nizar has to swallow to remove the rasp from his voice.” They’re not Horcruxes, but they’re like Horcruxes. They’re magical constructs, Severus. They are shards of souls given form and purpose by the murder of innocents. They seek out other souls because they desperately need to complete themselves, but it can’t happen because the rest of what was once their own soul is long departed—more shards used to create other Dementors, or the rest of the victim’s soul was discarded as unnecessary.”

“Dear God.” Severus looks ill, but the iaculus and basilisk are reinforcing each other to keep the
Dementor trapped—as are their clasped hands. “Then could Elfric—”

“I don’t know. There are things that a Necromancer does not tell to those who are not Necromancers, just as there are things regarding Pictish magic that I won’t speak of to anyone.” Nizar tugs on Severus’s hand. “We need to retreat,” he murmurs. “I think I can send the Dementor on its fucking way, but that is all.”

Severus nods and backs up, keeping pace with Nizar until they are beyond the ring of frozen ground the Dementor has created. Severus calls his iaculus back with silent words until it is once again flitting about over their heads.

“I am Lord of the Heights of Brae,” Nizar intones, letting the magic of his title fill his voice. “You will leave these lands, and you will never return!”

The basilisk Patronus releases the Dementor, but then it coils up next to the creature, waiting with a serpent’s precise stillness. The Dementor turns its cloaked head in their direction, looks to the basilisk, and lets out another blood-curdling shriek. It does not flee over the hills like a rolling fog, but simply vanishes.

“Shit, they’re capable of Desplazarse. That’s just fucking fab,” Nizar mutters.

“It still amuses me that I did my best to eliminate that term from my vocabulary, and yet you refuse to part with it,” Severus says. It’s not the greatest attempt at lightening the mood, but Nizar still appreciates it.

“It’s a nice word.” Nizar watches his Patronus crawl back up to them from the valley floor, where the ice is already starting to thaw. He doesn’t yet feel like dismissing the basilisk, but then, the iaculus is still present, too. “Severus, I don’t know how to fucking kill a soul shard that doesn’t have a body. I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

“I did say they were indestructible,” Severus reminds him.

“Nothing is indestructible,” Nizar retorts. “Just annoyingly fucking complicated. Shit. Don’t we have enough difficulties at the moment without adding in the problem of roaming and hungry soul shards?”

Severus’s lips twitch, a smile that wants to be a grimace. “Perhaps consider Narcissa’s letter, which speaks of delaying her planned spring fete to become a Beltane celebration, wherein she also used the skill of her words to tell us that Voldemort is now quite aware of his lacking Horcruxes.”

Nizar glares at him. “That was not actually an invitation to remind me that things can immediately become worse.”

“Then don’t ask such stupid fucking questions.”

“Don’t worry, I’m about to suffer for it, regardless.” Nizar runs his thumb along the runes on his wand that spell out his title of Protectoris. “You recall that adherence to attending dinner I mentioned? It was just delayed.”

Severus lets out a frustrated sigh. “Given that a Dementor was found nearly on our bloody doorstep? Nizar, I am not surprised you wish to complete the circling of this boundary. I only wonder if it will do any good.”

“Now that I know exactly what a Dementor is?” Nizar nods and returns to the thestral, who still looks deeply unhappy about the entire affair. “Once the boundary is in my head, I can keep those
fuckers out. Hogsmeade will be protected from Dementors, though Death Eaters are another concern entirely.”
Granted Warnings

Chapter Summary

The Underground has spies from all sorts of places, but Salazar would be honest in saying that the most intriguing of them are often of his own House.

Chapter Notes

I forgot the sorta-regular Friday update. Sorry about that!

Salazar reassures Minerva with a smile that there is nothing amiss when his brother and Severus both fail to report for the dinner hour. In truth, though, he isn’t certain. He feels uneasy, but it is a nebulous feeling that will not reveal itself no matter how he concentrates.

What grants him an answer is his own wine goblet. He waits for the noisiest part of the meal before tapping the rim of the metal cup three times with his fingertip. The image shifts and reveals nothing other than the land near the Heights, being investigated by a lone thestral. Salazar considers it, hides a smile, and taps the goblet again. There they are: Severus and Nizar are cloaked by the Invisibility Charm that would keep some poor non-magical sort from trying to figure out how a man could be riding an invisible horse. Severus didn’t bother with a horse, choosing flight instead. The thestral, if sighted, is far easier to explain—even if the explanation is based upon folklore and myth.

Salazar supposes Nizar must have chosen this evening to trace the magical boundary that grants him title as Earl over the Heights. The expressions Nizar and Severus are sporting, however, tell Salazar that something did not go according to plan. His brother looks especially out-of-sorts, a sight that Salazar does not like to behold. When Nizar has found a problem that stymies him to the point of expressing that sort of frustration and anger, it is a significant one. It’s rare for Salazar to find that look in Nizar’s eyes, and one of those events was recent—during Voldemort’s raids on the Ides of March.

After dinner, he retreats to the office he claimed on the second floor of the Defence Tower, which formerly had the lack of distinction of belonging to Dolores Umbridge. It now bears nothing of her presence at all, not even impressions of her stay lingering in Hogwarts’ magic. The office remained barren of anything but a desk and several chairs before Minerva put her foot firmly down upon his toes and reminded him that an office with personality is a space that might help to calm a student.

Thus, he has his revenge against whoever removed the concept of global geography from this school. On the wall above the fireplace is a map from AD 990, copied from an original he still has in Gipuzkoa. All of it is labeled properly, though he added emphasis on this copy to denote his, Godric’s, Helga’s, and Rowena’s points of origin, as well as making certain it is possible for the viewer to find Hogewáþ in the north of Briton. On the wall across from the tower windows is a map put together from multiple, gloriously crisp satellite images taken from orbit. The map behind his desk is a more traditional and current map of all the countries of the Earth, labeled within an inch of its bloody life with cities, countries, rivers, oceans, boundary lines, mountain ranges, forests, and
deserts. Unlike its non-magical counterparts, this one updates itself as the boundary lines and names of nations change due to politics and war—fortunate, given the number of geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe during the last year, let alone what was wrought with the Warsaw Pact.

He still wants Nizar’s original map returned to them. The Entrance Hall might no longer be the right place to hang it, but it should be easily found and viewed. Too many of these students are ignorant of geography beyond Western Europe, but Salazar is already fighting a war while teaching all of the history he thinks these children can stand to have crammed into their heads. Trying to also teach a Geography class would drive him to nightly, sodden drinking.

A slip of paper pops into the air above Salazar’s desk, interrupting him in the midst of trying to read through Miss Fawcett’s fascinating essay. She decided to research Helga’s origins, and once she discovered that Sigurd (or his descendants, Salazar cannot recall which) erased the second daughter of Hlodvir Thorfinnsson from what few physical records exist, her words took on the thoughtful fury of a Hufflepuff scorned. It’s of the last among those that he has to grade for the first homework assignment he gave to his History students, but he has, by necessity, needed to grade them slowly. Some of his students found useful references that Salazar then had to track down on his own.

A small handful claimed the use of books that do not exist. Salazar hopes they put in a bit more effort next time—any effort at all would be fine.

Salazar regretfully puts the essay aside, puts down his pen, and takes up the scrap of paper to discover his brother’s handwriting: *Impromptu and most necessary partial meeting in the staff lounge. Now.*

He Banishes the scrap of paper and rises from his desk. Perhaps now he will find out what his brother found so vexing while investigating a magical boundary line.

There are others already waiting in the staff lounge when he arrives. Severus is pacing, as is his preference when pondering an unpleasant difficulty. Pomona Sprout, who has finally, bloody finally allowed herself to be tied into Hogwarts’ magic, is seated, though she is watching Severus with a curious gaze. Minerva and Filius are looking at Nizar, who is resting on the table with his head pillowied on his arms. Last to arrive is Dumbledore, who is in a dressing gown as if he was already prepared for bed.

“I assume there is trouble, if you have called for only us,” Dumbledore says before anyone else can speak.

Nizar sits up, looking as if he would rather be in bed in truth. If his brother sleeps soundly for two nights in a row, Salazar might well consider it a miracle. “One problem solved, and another revealed that is so horrific, I have no idea yet how to even cope with it.”

“Oh, dear.” Minerva adjusts her hat as Severus gives up on pacing, joining them to sit at the table. “Given this week, grant us the solved problem first, please.”

“I can keep the Dementors out of Hogsmeade, and away from the Heights of Brae,” Nizar says. Salazar counts himself among those who are relieved by that statement. “For those who don’t know of the old boundary lines, I’ll send a map to you sometime tomorrow.”

“That is very good to hear,” Dumbledore murmurs. “I did not want to deprive our students of one of their few granted freedoms, but I didn’t wish to make the announcement until there was certainty as to their safety.”

“There still isn’t certainty.” Nizar looks annoyed by Dumbledore’s presumption. “The Heads of
House should discuss how we’re going to be guarding those children in Hogsmeade on the weekends they attend. I said I could keep out the Dementors. I said nothing of Death Eaters.”

“A fair point.” Filius sounds rather diplomatic about the affair. Salazar glances at him, then at Dumbledore, and wonders if he has missed the first steps of what might be the falling out of an old alliance. Filius stopped hiding his new ties to Hogwarts the moment the magic settled, revealing his status as Head of Ravenclaw in magical truth. He no longer needs concern himself with Dumbledore’s good opinion, and Salazar rather doubts Dumbledore is pleased by that. “But the Dementors are a certainty?”

“After meeting one of them nosing around near the Heights?” Nizar snorts. “I am aware of exactly what I’ve warded the boundary against. Yes, the Dementors are a certainty.”

Everyone present but for Nizar and Severus sits up straighter. “They were so close already?” Pomona Spout asks in shock.

“They were.” Nizar rubs at his right eye and sighs. “I wasn’t about to let the opportunity to find out what thosefuckers are made of pass by, either.”

Filius lets out a high-pitched whistle. Minerva stares at Nizar, and then glares at Severus as if it is his fault that Nizar is a bit touched in the head. “Was it worthwhile?”

Nizar stares back at her. “Minerva, it was terrifying. I discovered why we had no Dementors in my time.”

“They’re constructs, aren’t they?” Salazar asks. Nizar nods in confirmation. “I’d long suspected so, but even in the 1400s, it was quite the large world. They could easily have originated from a place so distant that not a hint of their existence ever came to us until that fool Ekrizdis dug them up.”

Dumbledore almost looks to be chewing on his own mustache, no doubt turning this information around in his thoughts to find the advantage it holds. “How did you discern their construction, Nizar?”

“I’m Earl over the Bloody Heights, and it was trespassing on my land. Oh, and that bit about being Bellum dux Magum,” Nizar adds, the hint of a cheeky smile on his face. “I asked my Patronus to ensnare it, and then I made the scary fucker talk to me.”

“Dear God, they can speak?” Pomona blurs in horror.

“It took quite a bit of…convincing.” Severus’s voice is smooth, but underlying tension still lurks beneath. “Dementors are capable of recognizing magic that is tied to the land. Between that and being strangled by a basilisk Patronus, it had little choice. I also had the impression that if it were their choice, Dementors would never speak at all. I myself prefer them to be silent.”

“What did you learn?” Dumbledore is no longer pretending to be a half-asleep wizard pondering a problem. His voice is harsher, and his gaze has sharpened, lacking the irritating twinkle of his favorite Mind Magic distraction. That does not mean he lowers his shields, but Salazar much prefers the absence of the blasted twinkle.

“They claimed their creator as Ekrizdis, the same idiot who created Azkaban,” Severus replies.

“Ekrizdis used the worst sort of Necromancy to craft them, too. They’re rather like Horcruxes, but worse.” Nizar explains exactly what he means, and why it is that Dementors consume souls.

Salazar feels his blood try to freeze in his veins, as if he was already trapped in a Dementor’s
presence. “There is no body to remove that shard from. No physical shell at all. You cannot use a basilisk’s venom or Fiendfyre against that.” Mind Magic would not work either; there is no mind to remove the shard from. “How do you remove a soul shard that is its own entity?”

Nizar lifts his arms in a frustrated shrug. “If I knew that, hermano, there would be no ill news to report.”

“So close to the school.” Dumbledore narrows his eyes. “Do you think this one was sent by Voldemort?”

“No,” Severus answers at once. “If it had been sent to explore the land around the school, it would have been there already. This one was looking for…something.”

Salazar can guess at what that “something” was meant to be. “Nizar?”

“I agree with him,” Nizar adds, though he is still considering the question. “I don’t think Voldemort keeps these Dementors with him at all times. Why take the chance that your leashed pets are not so leashed, and suddenly you are lacking loyal followers because a Dementor desired a snack? No. I think he lets them roam, but if he has promised them souls to eat, they would flock right back to Voldemort’s side the moment he called for them.”

“Tactics,” Filius says in musing agreement. “If they’ve been allowed to roam freely, I wonder how he communicates with them?”

“I don’t even know how the Minister for Magic controlled them,” Nizar replies. “Though if they were all created with the same magical working, I would guess that they can hear each other. Voldemort could keep one Dementor nearby and use that one as a mouthpiece to retrieve the others.”

“The Minister for Magic controlled the Dementors with the promise of the souls and sorrows of Azkaban to feast upon,” Dumbledore informs them. Salazar tries not to wince and wishes Dumbledore had not been fool enough to say that.

“I see.” Nizar’s voice is as chill as the frost a Dementor brings. “Instead of leaving a vile creature on an island where it might have been trapped, the Ministry decided to bribe them with things it had no fucking right to entice them with!”

“But Azkaban—” Pomona starts to say, but Nizar isn’t having it.

“You do not barter with other people’s souls!” Nizar seethes. “They are not your possessions. They do not belong to anyone but the person whose soul it is! If anyone believes I will ever again allow a Dementor to stand guard over an imprisoned magician, then they are a bigger fool than that noseless walking corpse!”

“I do not disagree with you,” Minerva says after a moment, though Salazar does not miss Dumbledore’s brief flash of dismay. “But what do you suggest, instead? A Dementor was…useful, in the sense that it kept an imprisoned magician from escaping.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “It was useful right up until someone took advantage of a Dementor’s hunger to make them a better offer. Hadrian’s Wall has already discussed a better solution with Madam Bones. A properly constructed prison, built and warded literally from the ground up, to humanely house and stand guard over such imprisoned magicians until they are released on bond or their sentences completed. Why has warding fallen so far out of favor in Wizarding Britain, anyway?”

“I doubt any of us present know the answer to that, even given certain ages,” Dumbledore says, granting Salazar a nod. “It was not taught in Hogwarts when my parents attended, nor their parents,
“Sometime within the 1800s. I do not recall who pushed for the removal of that instruction.” Salazar has such information written down somewhere, but would have to retrieve it from Sherwood-on-the-Marsh. He doubts he will have the time to do so, but at least his writings will survive for others to find.

“Ridiculous,” Nizar mutters.

“When is this prison to be built?” Filius asks.

“It’s already being built, because I was not about to wait around for Wizarding Britain to realize that Her Majesty was highly displeased to discover that the Ministry for Magic was happily disobeying Article Three of the European Convention of Human Rights—that of humane imprisonment and rehabilitation with a complete lack of torture. Azkaban is a horror that was meant only to see people dead within its walls, whether a Dementor did the killing or not.”

Nizar leans forward, a smile on his face that is far closer to a snarl. “Did you know that the Ministry for Magic had been duly informed of the articles by the Prime Minister at the time of the signing of the Convention, and decided to simply ignore them? If the Minister for Magic who had made that decision were still alive, he would be within a courtroom of Her Majesty’s choosing to face serious and severe charges of war crimes.”

“The Wizengamot voted on whether Wizarding Britain was going to accept Muggle-created laws regarding such things,” Dumbledore says quietly. “Am I to be held on charges, as well?”

Nizar gives Dumbledore such a cutting glance, it’s a wonder the man doesn’t bleed from it. “I have seen the Wizengamot records for that vote. You abstained. Tell me why.”

“In matters of such importance in regards to the future of Wizarding Britain, I have long felt that the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot should allow others their voice. Too many would look upon my vote and decide that it should influence their decisions.”

Nizar is still watching Dumbledore, as if waiting for him to slip. Salazar is bloodthirsty enough to hope that he does. “You did not speak after the vote, which was overwhelmingly in favor of keeping Azkaban in its current state, by the way.”

“Azkaban had been used as the wizarding prison, with its Dementor guardians, for so long that it was…” Dumbledore hesitates. “I suppose you could consider it cultural. Many felt that the Muggles were disrespecting our ways by trying to insist we follow rules instituted by a committee of which we were not invited to be part of.”

“And now? With Azkaban’s obvious flaws so exposed?” Nizar asks.

“I have no love for Dementors,” Dumbledore responds, briefly lowering his head. “Not after their attempts to frighten and murder students under my care, and especially not after Fudge ordered a Dementor to invade school grounds and murder Bartemius Crouch, Junior. No matter his crimes, Crouch was still a bound prisoner who was not marked for execution. If a prison can be constructed that truly keeps a wizard imprisoned where they belong, then I find I prefer the idea of Azkaban remaining empty.”

“Or perhaps warding it anew, and reserving it for one individual alone,” Severus suggests, a flicker of rage in his eyes. “Voldemort. I would not trust him to be locked up in a warded prison with other magicians, but behind wards of his own, isolated from any that might assist him? If he is captured
rather than killed outright, it might be the only way he is ever successfully held.”

“I’m fond of that solution,” Minerva says, though Filius and Pomona both look to require convincing. “The idea of him imprisoned close enough to others to converse with them is unsettling.”

“He would have no access to magic. None of them would, not with the wards properly built.” Nizar is still regarding Dumbledore, but not as sharply as before. “Anyone entering the facility, guards included, will immediately—if temporarily—be reduced to your so-called Squib status. They would still have their magic, but be utterly unable to use it. However…” Nizar nods at Severus. “I think Severus is correct. If I don’t get the opportunity to make the stupid fuck very, very dead, then warding Azkaban for his imprisonment while he awaits trial does appeal to me.”

“Why would he even be granted a trial?” Pomona finally asks, scowling. “We know what he’s done!”

“Because then it is undeniable,” Dumbledore says in a gentle voice—not quite patronizing, but so close it sets Salazar’s teeth on edge. “I doubt Tom will ever show remorse for all he has done, but a trial places his guilt on display for all of Wizarding Britain to see.”

“I’m not going to go out of my way to keep Voldemort alive,” Nizar reminds them crossly. “Dead, dead, dead is still very much the goal.”

Dumbledore returns his attention to Nizar. “How many rules of the United Kingdom, and of these articles, will the Wizengamot be expected to recognize as the cooperation between Queen Elizabeth II and Wizarding Britain progresses?”

“Article One merely proclaims the validity of the laws. Article Two protects the right of every person to their life, including non-humans and animals, or to any recognized legal persons,” Nizar says, smiling. “That one is certain to cause an uproar.”

“It would be about bloody time,” Filius observes under his breath.

“Article Four prohibits all types of slavery, forced servitude, and forced labor, though labor is exempted if it is performed as part of imprisonment, civic obligation, or military service. Article Five details that every recognized legal person has the right to liberty unless subject to lawful arrest. Nothing like those shoe-horned imprisonments for differences of opinion that Fudge instigated would be tolerated.” Nizar’s lip curls up. “Article Six provides the detailed right to a public trial within a reasonable timeframe, and if someone is held in prison before that trial, then Article Three still applies.”

“No more cases like Sirius Black,” Minerva says in approval.

“Article Seven details that one cannot be penalized for a crime if said crime was performed before laws were put in place to make the act illegal. Article Eight regards an individual’s right to privacy in all facets of life excepting in cases of lawful searches or investigations. Article Nine is in regards to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion—Wizarding Britain would not be able to declare Pure-blood ways to be the only ways to behave, or anything else I’m sure some of them would love to get away with.”

Pomona is regarding Nizar with what appears to be newfound appreciation. “I really and truly like this list. What else?”

“Article Ten: freedom of expression, so the press and information cannot be suppressed or corrupted by government or other sources. Exceptions are once again only in regards to lawful restrictions if
the freedom of information would genuinely endanger the population. Article Eleven: freedom of assembly, something that is seriously lacking in Wizarding Britain. Article Twelve is in regards to women’s rights for the prevention of forced marriages or underage marriages, though I’m given to understand that the part about underage marriage applies regardless of gender. Article Thirteen was written to reinforce the previous acts; Article Fourteen prohibits any form of discrimination. That one ties directly back to Article Two; the two articles reinforce each other. The other articles follow along in similar veins.”

“Goblins would have to be recognized,” Filius says gleefully.

“Any sentient species in Wizarding Britain would have to be recognized.” Salazar smiles. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for such a day.”

Minerva glances at him in surprise. “You were there, weren’t you?”

“I was able to witness the Convention’s signing, yes, though only because I was still on such good terms with Prime Minister Churchill. Seeing those articles for human decency being ratified by Wizarding Britain would be of great pleasure.”

“I do think they are a positive step forward, as well,” Dumbledore agrees. “The difficulty will be in convincing the Wizengamot. Such drastic change requires a vote of seventy-five percent or higher in favor.”

“That’s too bad for them, because if Wizarding Britain does not ratify the Convention and begin adhering to its standards, Her Majesty and Prime Minister John Major have no difficulty at all in declaring Wizarding Britain to be a dictatorship, and will act accordingly to dissolve that governing body entirely.”

Salazar has to bite back sudden laughter. Nizar is hoping the Wizengamot will be foolish enough to refuse to ratify the Convention, as it would make his plans to reintegrate magical society with its non-magical counterpart so much simpler.

“I see.” Dumbledore tugs at his long beard. “When is it expected that these articles from the European Convention be recognized by the Ministry?”

“Her Majesty understands that we have just entered into a state of war, and that our current Minister for Magic is in an interim position,” Nizar says. “It is expected that educating Wizarding Britain regarding the articles will begin after the election that confirms Bones, or potentially saddles us with bloody Thicknesse. Ratifying the articles would be expected within the year of the new Minister for Magic taking office, or after the war has ended and all difficulties related to it have been formally concluded.”

“However, we really did not come here to discuss life-changing politics.” Severus is giving Nizar an irritated look. Salazar wonders if they’d originally intended on other plans and has to bite back another smile. He’ll taunt his brother regarding his romantic affairs at a later date—perhaps, oh, tomorrow. “The wandering Dementors were the concern, as well as Hogsmeade’s safety.”

“Quite so.” Dumbledore stands up and resettles his dressing gown. Salazar is glad that the man’s night clothes, at least, tend not to be literal pains to witness. “I will pass word along to Kingsley by way of the Order, and he will spread the word in the Ministry regarding the Dementors.” He pauses. “I suppose he should also announce that Hogsmeade will be free of Dementors, should anyone wish to shelter in the village. There are still empty homes in Hogsmeade that were never reclaimed after the last war.”
“I think that to be an excellent idea,” Salazar decides to say.

“Yes, quite.” Minerva looks to be thinking something over. “The property I own there has stood empty for long enough. If a family has need of a home, then they will be welcome to it.”

“That’s quite kind. You’re certain?” Pomona asks. Minerva gives her an absent nod, no doubt already plotting on how to make the announcement public without it becoming a spectacle.

Dumbledore pauses in the doorway and turns around. “Oh, and there is to be an Order meeting on Saturday morning, barring any unforeseen complications. Sirius has volunteered to continue hosting it, though the Order has grown exponentially now that it has been recognized by the M.L.E. as a legitimate defensive body working on behalf of Wizarding Britain and the Ministry.”

Minerva starts out of her planning in surprise. “Goodness, when did that happen?”

“I received the owl this morning, but hadn’t yet decided on how to spread the word. Now it begins with you. Good night,” Dumbledore announces cheerfully, and leaves the lounge.

“Complications like the funerals,” Minerva says after Dumbledore’s departure. “Several of us will not be able to attend, myself being one of them.”

“I am not expected at any funeral, and I take excellent notes,” Salazar informs them, grinning. “It will be interesting to see who among the Ministry decided to become formal members of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I think it might have helped membership numbers to climb when it was realized that all of Britain’s war mages are members of the Order,” Filius points out wryly. “It’s a good thing Sirius’s kitchen has excellent Extending Charms built into it. We’ll need the space.”

“And what about you, Salazar?” Pomona asks him. He is pleased to see that it is the least hostile expression she has ever granted him. He absolutely adores it when people become sensible. “Will we see any of the Underground present at this meeting aside from yourself?”

Salazar spreads his hands in an innocent gesture. “Aside from my recent circumstances, we’re all considered to be dead, Pomona, no matter which side the deceased originally fought for. I don’t think a crowded meeting would be the best sort of place to reintroduce them—and I don’t think it yet safe to do so.”

“We should certainly preserve what spies we have left, yes,” Severus says, granting Salazar a brief nod.

Salazar nods back, but he is also plotting. He cannot reintroduce everyone, no, but perhaps it is time for at least one member of the Underground to return to life.

* * * *

Severus finds Thursday morning’s paper to be interesting, at least in how it grants more detail than Dumbledore did in regards to the Ministry’s recognition of the Order of the Phoenix. Interim-Minister Bones tasked the M.L.E. with finally recognizing the work that the Order performed during the last war in support of the Ministry’s structurally scattered and crumbling law enforcement. With that done, she was then able to convince the government under her sway to recognize the Order of
the Phoenix as a legitimate, volunteer-only branch of the M.L.E.—one singularly devoted to the fall of You-Know-Who.

He doesn’t recognize the author of this article, but he either likes them or loathes them. Whoever they are, they decided to write again of Severus’s exoneration on charges of being a Death Eater during the first war, reminding the reading public of his status as a spy working for Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix in order to assist with the downfall of Voldemort.

“Why?” Severus mutters under his breath. “What purpose did that serve?”

“It’s preparation,” Salazar replies from the seat next to him, his voice so quiet that Severus can scarcely hear the man. “I asked for it to be said, though I apologize for not warning you beforehand.”

“Preparation for what?” Severus asks, but suspects he knows.

Salazar glances at him. “Some of mine fought for the Order or the Ministry, but a fair number of them were Death Eaters who chose to become spies. If it is already in public memory that a Death Eater can change his spots, then they will recall it again when it is safe for the others to resume their original identities.”

Severus frowns. “So soon?”

“Perhaps.” Salazar lifts a mug of coffee to his lips. “Gwen is finding it difficult to continue in her role of spying now that she is pregnant. She would be the first to step forward, willing to put her literal arm on the line so the Order and the M.L.E. can witness as Nizar removes her Dark Mark.”

“Gwen,” Severus repeats, and then he nearly drops his fucking teacup as he realizes who Salazar is referring to. “Please tell me that it is not still Abraxus Macnair she is wed to.”

“No. He had no intention of changing his ways, and ended up dead for it.” Salazar releases a long sigh. “Such saved her the effort of divorcing the worthless twat.” Then he glances at Severus. “Did my brother sleep last night?”

“When I got up for the day, your brother was still sleeping,” Severus replies. It’s been such a rarity since the first months of their courtship that Severus left Nizar in bed. He’ll check on Nizar at 7:50, well aware that the man can be up, dressed, groomed, and teaching by the time eight o’clock chimes from the bell tower.

“Bloody fucking miracle,” Salazar says. “I’d tell him to perform a strong bit of magic every day for that result if it would not ultimately be exhausting.”

“And, of course, the difficulty of the flashbacks,” Severus adds quietly.

Salazar glances at him in sudden concern. “Were there more? I thought the two he recalled to be difficulty enough.”

“There were at least three blank ones late last night, which are imminently more frustrating,” Severus answers. “Even if I look with Legilimency afterwards, I cannot tell if they’re blank because of Nizar’s damaged ability to recall memory, or if the mind is attempting to facilitate the recollection of a memory that is supposed to be there, but no longer exists.”

Salazar growls under his breath. “Fucking Obliviscaris omnia. I despise the fact that I must be grateful it was cast upon Nizar while he was trapped in that painting.”

“What? Why?” That is Minerva, who proves she has been paying more attention to their
conversation than she appeared to be. Slytherin subtlety finally seems to be rubbing off on the woman.

Salazar raises an eyebrow, though he lowers his voice so only Severus and Minerva will hear him. “Obliviscaris omnia means to forget everything. That includes all that the brain does to maintain the body’s survival. Even the knowledge of autonomic processes such as breathing and biological functions would be obliterated. To cast that spell on a living being is to execute them.”

“Good God,” Minerva breathes, though she keeps her eyes directed at her plate in order to hide her expression beneath the brim of her hat. “I hadn’t yet considered that.”

“I had.” Salazar eyes the coffee pot before deciding on a refill. “We might have neglected to guard against Obliviscatur, but all the other protections on that portrait saved Nizar’s life.”

Severus hates that he feels chilled anew by something that is long over and done with. “Then Utredus the Gaunt meant to kill him.”

“If not by performing the spell, then certainly by the slow death caused by the lack of fuel for the painting’s Preservation Charms,” Salazar says, “though that should not be a surprise. Above all else left in this castle, Nizar represented knowledge that Utredus wished to eradicate.”

“I’ve spoken to the painting of young Elfric often,” Minerva finally says. “He would never, ever consider doing such to his own father, even if someone tried to convince him it was necessary.”

Salazar nods. “Why do you think my brother finds it so easy to think of them as two different beings?”

*N          *          *          *          *

Nizar is already sitting on the desk in his classroom, holding a cup of tea in one hand, when Severus goes upstairs to make certain he’s awake for the day. “Thank you for the extra few minutes of rest,” Nizar says. He glances at the open door of his classroom, checking for intrusions, before subjecting Severus to a kiss that is entirely too distracting.

“I have to deal with Gryffindor and Slytherin third-years in less than two minutes,” Severus growls. “That was not nice.”

“I have never once claimed to be such,” Nizar replies, though his cheerful expression falters. “Fifth-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs for me. The others are doing their best to distract Justin, but…I do not see his outlook on life improving anytime soon.”

“Nor I,” Severus admits of Finch-Fletchley. Not since the Bones and the McKinnons has Wizarding Britain seen that kind of familial genocide, and worse, it is not even being granted the same horrific regard as the previous losses. They were, after all, only Muggles.

He always hates that his younger self was stupid enough to join Voldemort, but when the ideals of blood purity make light of non-magical losses, he hates himself quite a bit more. He never adhered to those same ungodly standards, no, but that does not excuse the fact that he worked with people who supported them.

“Severus.” Nizar reaches up and places two fingers against Severus’s lips. “Please cease to blame
yourself for events and ideals you are not responsible for. I am not above casting a roaming Stinging Hex, one set to gain your attention every time your thoughts wander in that direction."

“That is because you believe in efficiency,” Severus counters, but does manage to shake off the worst of his self-blame. He cannot teach Potions in that mindset, nor does he want to be chased by invisible fucking bees for the entire day.

“Are you guys being cheesy in here?” Miss Jones asks as she enters the classroom, smirking.

“Nonsense. I haven’t the slightest bit of cheese on my person,” Nizar retorts, grinning. Severus rolls his eyes at the exchange and Apparates downstairs, startling the hell out of several third-years waiting by his closed classroom door. “Well?” Severus drawls once he pushes the door open and no one moves. “Are you going inside, or shall we attempt to somehow conduct your Potions Double in this hallway?”

That, at least, encourages them to move. Astoria Greengrass is turning bright red in her efforts not to chortle too loudly, which is amusing. It is also not a surprise to see her set up a cauldron at the same table as Edward Black.

Severus really, truly would love to see Geronimus Greengrass drop dead at the idea of his precious youngest daughter dating a dubbed Blood Traitor and a Muggle-born. It would be yet another bright point on what may prove to be a very long, dark year.

Salazar finds him at five o’clock after he’s done encouraging the fourth-year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws to please leave already. For some reason, this particular lot has always been slow to pack up when a Double set is concluded.

“Has Minerva returned yet?” Severus asks, aware that Salazar was meant to cover her three o’clock class of Transfiguration for the fifth-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws.

“Not yet. Eustas was forced to take my place to oversee the darling fifth-year Hufflepuffs and Slytherins,” Salazar replies. “I’m not surprised the funeral ran long. Mister Thomas has quite a bit of family on his father’s side among the Morrows that he was never made aware of. I expected it to be less about saying farewell to a man he never knew, and far more about greeting a great deal of unexpected relations.”

“With Minerva present to put the fear of God into them if they dare to say a single impolite word about Mister Thomas or his mother.” Severus approves of that arrangement. Minerva is often stern, but delights like a cat in terrorizing those who’ve most certainly earned it.

Once Severus makes certain his classroom is clear of students, clean of potential spills, and all supplies have been stored properly in their cupboards, he closes and locks the door. “Is this a conversation we should be holding in my office?”

Salazar gives him a smile of approval. “Ever the perceptive spy,” he murmurs.

Severus shakes his head and leads the way, stopping only once to remind several of his first-years that if they get caught using those Dung Bombs, it’s on their own heads. Miss Coote gives him a look of sublime innocence and swears that the only place she will be setting off those particular Wheezes will be outdoors, atop her older brother’s head.

“Siblings,” Salazar remarks fondly as the first-years rush off. “Though I do wonder what Mister Coote could possibly have done to warrant that sort of retaliation.”

“I don’t want to know,” Severus replies. That will not be his mess to discover and clean up after;
sixth-year Coote belongs to Minerva. He pushes open his office door and discovers that Nizar is waiting for them...as is Cassius Warrington. “Oh, this should be interesting.”

“That is the wrong word entirely,” Nizar says in irritation. “No, Cassius, I am not angry with you. I am angry with idiots.”

“Yes, sir.” Warrington replies, though Severus notes with amusement that Warrington is leaning away from Nizar.

“I take it there is a reason for your presence, Mister Warrington?” Severus has suspicions, but he was truly hoping their Marked dunderheads would see the sense in not attempting mischief while still in Hogwarts.

Of course, if they were willing to see sense, they would not be Marked at all. Severus recalls all too well what it is like to be seventeen and stupid.

“Yes, sir.” Warrington is pale, but he swallows and straightens his shoulders. “I haven’t let on to the others that I might be having...other thoughts. About him. They think I’ve begun playing both sides to allay suspicion.”

Severus nods. “Go on.”

“It means they’re still running off at the mouth whenever I’m around.” Warrington sighs. “They’re planning an attack within the school. It isn’t directed by the Dark Lord, and I didn’t receive the same sort of letter from my mother, but the others have been getting encouragement by owl to start ‘meeting with the standards they’re supposed to be representing.’”

“Which would be idiocy.” Nizar looks to be grinding his teeth. Of-age students acting against the school place him in the awkward position of trying to guard them and defend against them both. Severus doesn’t envy him that conflict.

“What sort of attack, Mister Warrington?” Severus asks.

“They’ve been discussing several options, but highest on the list...” Warrington holds up his hand and ticks off points with each finger. “Assassinating Dumbledore, assassinating you for being a traitor, assassinating Professor Salazar for desecrating the name of Slytherin, assassinating Professor Slytherin for doing the same, or assassinating a war mage—and they’re not being particular about which one.”

“Is there a timeframe involved?”

Warrington shrugs. “Nothing specific. I only know they’re decided on doing one or all of those things, but none of them have plotted out when except for the part where they’re going to act within a week. I had the impression from Hooper that there would be consequences waiting at home during Easter Break if they didn’t carry through. To prove themselves,” Warrington adds in disgust.

“Mister Hooper isn’t marked,” Nizar says in surprise.

“No, but he’s of age. Spying,” Warrington adds. “If any of the others are spying, they’re underage, so I couldn’t tell you for certain. The ones who are Marked tend not to take the Baby Death Eaters seriously. They think they’re too sloppy.”

They are too bloody sloppy, Severus thinks in annoyance. Their dubbed Baby Death Eaters are on the level of the Marauders for subtlety, and might be on the verge of making those four idiots look circumspect.
“I take it that by your sharing of this information, you’re announcing you have no intention of joining them,” Salazar says.

Warrington bites his lip before nodding. “At the rate my parents are going, they’ll end up dead or imprisoned for life. I don’t think they consider me of much use aside from the fact that I’m their Heir, since they’ll never recognize that my older sister is just as capable—but then, she is a Blood Traitor that my parents disinherited, so I guess they think I’m their last tool. I don’t want…I’ve never wanted to be a tool. I just didn’t think I had a choice until Professor Snape proved otherwise.”

Severus raises both eyebrows in surprise. “Me?”

“Of course, sir.” Warrington looks baffled that Severus would be confused by the idea. “We all thought you were loyal to him. My parents spoke often on how you’d ingratiated yourself to the point that you were the man You-Know-Who trusted the most—and you were a bloody spy. The others were so convinced the double-agent bit was nonsense that they were still certain you were loyal to—to V-Voldemort—until the Prophet finally reported otherwise. You made a decision, sir. Hell, that was blatant defiance! If the others want to be tools, that’s on them, but I’d rather live by a properly Slytherin example.”

Those are very valid points, but when Severus stepped away from Voldemort, he had none of that in mind. He’d been thinking of himself, of escaping both Voldemort and blasted Dumbledore’s control—and of Nizar, who didn’t give up on him even when Severus was sliding inevitably down the path to becoming a fool of a Death Eater. The idea that he is serving as an example to those with the sense to recognize it is…daunting.

Not that he will admit to such. “That is very well-spoken, Mister Warrington,” Severus says quietly. “Do you intend on the removal of your Dark Mark?”

“Professor Slytherin says it can be altered so You-Know-Who can’t kill me with it.” Warrington turns faintly green. “Not that I knew he could until it was mentioned. I’m trying to figure out how to tell the others that the Mark is a bloody bomb waiting to go off, but I don’t know if they’ll listen.”

“Cassius is going to linger among their company until the idiots make their plans a certainty,” Nizar explains. “The moment they’re ready to act, we can either prevent them from doing so, or allow them to out themselves in a way that cannot be denied without endangering anyone else.”

“Kingsley Shacklebolt would accept a Pensieved memory from Mister Warrington as testimony, proof of their intention to commit murder,” Salazar says. “We may not need allow them to do anything except speak of enough verbal rope to hang themselves with.”

Severus finds that preferable, especially as at least one of those Marked idiots knows the Melting Hex that has proven itself so destructively fatal. “Mister Warrington, when your chosen task is done, I strongly suggest writing to your sister and telling her that you will be welcoming her back to the family once you are its legal head. She was always intelligent and sensible, and enjoyed embodying the traits of our House.”

Warrington smiles. “I’d already planned to write to Amira, but thank you for thinking so highly of her, sir.”

Severus inclines his head. “I do not forget any of my students, Mister Warrington, but those I remember most fondly are the ones who were intelligent enough to discard foolish notions, especially if it was an ideal held by Voldemort.”
Chapter Summary

“Sir, I feel it necessary to warn you that your House is about to hoist you overhead and cart you out of this Hall.”

Chapter Notes

Yes, the title is deliberate. *g*

Thank you for helping me attain another goal, guys. <3

“What a day this shall be,” Minerva is saying as she approaches the table on Friday morning. Salazar is following her, but Nizar thinks he’s still preoccupied by the revelations recently provided by Cassius Warrington.

Nizar takes in Minerva’s wardrobe, noting the dominance of black. “Funerals again?”

Minerva nods as she sits down next to Nizar after Salazar retrieves her chair on her behalf. “Dean Thomas’s mother. Her funeral is to be private, so I expect much less fuss than the one that occurred during the funeral of David Morrow.”

“How did Mister Thomas handle his father’s family? Or perhaps I should say: how did the Morrow family handle Mister Thomas’s presence?” Filius asks.

Minerva frowns. “None of them jumped forward and tried to claim him, but only one of David’s cousins dared to be openly rude. He’ll be avoiding sitting down in chairs for the next week or so, and to the Morrow family’s credit, I wasn’t the one who administered the rebuke. As for today’s funeral: Mister Thomas did not ask for my attendance, but accepted when I offered to accompany him.”

“I suspect he doesn’t want to be alone with his aunt,” Aurora murmurs. “It still disturbs me how bitterly the Muggle world is holding onto the idea of same-sex couples as abhorrent.”

“At least Her Majesty didn’t blink at the idea of triad-marriages,” Nizar says. “Granted, I had to explain the concept in the Ministry’s legal terms and its acceptance in religious churches that still cater to magicians, but she was fine with it. The only difficulty would be trying to carry that law over into the non-magical world.”

“Just like same-gender marriages.” Aurora seems to decide it’s time to change the subject. “Cassandra let her students know yesterday that today’s Magical Theory classes were canceled, and has already departed with her daughter. Stirling’s funeral isn’t until this afternoon, but I imagine she and Miss Shafiq would like a quiet morning to prepare.”

“Or to prepare effigies to burn,” Pomona adds from further down the table. “Cassandra and Peter were not much fond of each other after their divorce.”
“Cassandra wouldn’t do that to her daughters.” Charity reflects on it. “Probably not.”

“Unless they assist in the effigy-making. Cassandra did say at the time that Stirling was vicious about dragging their daughters into a succession of Ministry courtrooms, not to mention the battle for custody he decided to wage in the Muggle courts,” Bathsheda adds. “Fortunately, he did not succeed in any of that nonsense.”

“It’s still her father, though,” Charity insists, and thus ends Nizar’s latest interesting insights into Cassandra Shafiq’s family. He wonders if those court battles are the reason Cassandra does not regularly wear a hajib, as her daughter prefers now that Kellah is allowed to do so by the changed school dress code. The tolerance that Christians and Muslims have for each other has fluctuated often during the centuries. If the non-magical courtroom insisted upon Biblical swearing without even a consideration of anything else…well, Nizar spent enough time in Court to know that anything can be used as a weapon against you. Cassandra is intelligent enough to be aware of that, as well.

“Dumbledore has absented himself, I see,” Severus notes as he joins them.

“He’s attending the funerals of Scrimgeour and Dexter Fortescue as Chief of the Wizengamot, and seeing to Elphias Doge’s burial on behalf of both the Wizengamot and the Order of the Phoenix, given that most of the latter’s members are unavailable to attend,” Minerva informs them all. “He might be attending Edith Pettigrew’s funeral, as well, but if so, he didn’t mention it.”

“If he skives off, Sirius Black is going to be there,” Nizar says, but he doesn’t think Dumbledore would dare. He wants the backing of the Wizengamot, and to discuss the Order of the Phoenix’s newfound position in the M.L.E. He’s too bloody happy about that official recognition to pass on the opportunity. “Black and Madam Pettigrew had just begun speaking again. Remus reports that Sirius is desperately trying to figure out how to blame himself.”

“I’d just like to see the twit claim blame he has earned, rather than go hunting for it elsewhere,” Severus mutters in irritation. “If I am capable of telling someone that I genuinely regret attempting to murder them, he is certainly capable of the same!”

“Capable? Probably. Recovered enough from Azkaban to fully recognize why it is necessary?” Nizar shakes his head. “That, I still doubt. Give it time, Severus. In the meantime, at least he has gone to great lengths not to be a complete prick.”

“Swearing. At. The. Staff. Table,” Minerva utters, peering around Salazar to glare at him. Nizar holds up both hands and smiles in acquiescence. “I will be seeing off Mx. Shelby after breakfast, so that they may attend their parents’ funeral.” Most of them nod in acknowledgement. Nizar has heard mention of those who will be attending Morgana Belby-Fudge’s funeral, and that of her deceased relations, but he is vengefully pleased by the fact that no one at Hogwarts seems much interested in attending the afternoon funeral of Cornelius Fudge.

“It’s the weekend funerals that will be harder,” Poppy notes, sounding grieved. “I’ve not needed to see an entire family put into the ground since the McKinnons passed on together.”

Severus makes a derisive sound, but doesn’t comment. Nizar silently agrees that “passed on” does not hold the same meaning as “brutally murdered.”

“What of Hadrian’s Wall’s attendance?” Filius pipes up, pausing in the midst of slathering toast. There are more preserves on that slice than there is actual bread. “I’d meant to ask, but it’s been that sort of week.”

“Madam Tyler will be present at every non-magical funeral,” Nizar replies. “We thought it best.
Those who are non-magical should have the reassurance that their government is investigating the deaths of their relatives, even if they never learn why."

“She was present at the Morrow funeral yesterday,” Minerva says. “I can see why you like her, Nizar. She has quite the way with words.”

“And with weapons,” Nizar adds blandly. “I didn’t choose her for the posting, but if asked, she would have been the first non-magical official I’d have pointed to.”

There is a moment of odd silence. “What the bloody hell is Hadrian’s Wall?” Bathsheda finally asks in frustration. “Aside from the obvious historical reference!”

“Oh, right. That hasn’t been in the paper yet. It was meant to be in Monday’s article until that was delayed until…well, today,” Nizar realizes. Joyous did warn him, but he has been understandably preoccupied by Dementors and plotting, idiot students. “So you’ll discover the news for yourself in just a few minutes.”

“To temper your curiosity until the newspapers arrive, Hadrian’s Wall is a codename for the new Magical Liaison Office established by Queen Elizabeth II,” Salazar says in an innocuous voice. “It’s based within MI-5, otherwise known as the United Kingdom’s domestic security service.”

“Well!” Aurora sounds startled. “I must admit I didn’t expect that level of cooperation from the Muggle government, especially when the process is still so new.”

“I’m persuasive,” Nizar offers, smiling. “Also, Her Majesty is intelligent and sensible.”

“You lot sound quite familiar with this MI-5,” Quintinus speaks up. Nizar is once again glad that there is an amplification charm for the benefit of those at this table, not to mention the muting charm that keeps most of their louder conversations from student ears.

“I wasn’t MI-5 previous to re-accepting a war mage’s responsibilities,” Salazar answers him. “I’d previously served with MI-6. International security.”

“International,” Quintinus repeats. “Grindelwald, then, like the papers mentioned?”

Nizar can hear it when Salazar grinds his teeth. “Yes.”

“They didn’t discuss MI-5 or MI-6 in the article regarding yourself and Nizar,” Aurora says curiously.

“Well, it was written for the audience of Wizarding Britain,” Nizar says dryly. “I don’t think Madam Spencer wishes to frighten off the whole of her readership with terrifying terminology when she’s still trying to get the magical population used to the pair of us.”

The owls begin arriving promptly at 7:30, cutting off further discussion. Nizar is glad of the timing. Salazar does not wish to discuss his spying on Grindelwald unless he has no choice, just as he likewise hates discussing his spying on Voldemort during the last war. He’ll do so on behalf of the Underground, but not without pressing need.

He reaches behind Minerva and gently latches onto Salazar’s shoulder. Salazar reaches up and grips Nizar’s hand before releasing him. That is one message easily passed on and understood.

Now he can concern himself with the entertainment to come. Nizar pays careful attention to the Gryffindor table, and is thus witness to the moment when Ron Weasley unrolls a copy of the Daily Prophet and promptly spews fried egg from his nose.
“Oh—gross!” Parvati gasps out, trying to flick bits of egg from her blouse. “Ronald Weasley, what in blazes—"

“MY BROTHER IS A BLEEDIN’ WAR MAGE!” Weasley bleats at full volume. “WHAT THE SODDING HELL, BILL!”

Minerva sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Five points from Gryffindor, Mister Weasley,” she says under her breath. “Though I can’t decide if it’s for the shouting, the lack of table manners, or the swearing.”

Nizar smiles but keeps his attention on the students. Half of Gryffindor has forgotten they have newspapers of their own and are crowding around the Weasley section of the table, trying to read over Ron’s shoulder. “Wow.” Fred looks gobsmacked. “That’s a great flying leap of a social climb, isn’t it?”

“Forget that part. Mum is going to lose her bloody mind if no one warned her!” George exclaims.

“Mum can lose her mind all she wants. Bill is a war mage,” Ginny emphasizes, grinning. “Our brother! Our eldest brother is an acknowledged badass!”

“So is his fiancée,” Miss Granger points out—rather diplomatically, Nizar thinks, given the tension in the Weasley clan regarding that particular engagement.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” is the next shriek he hears. Miss Applebee is standing on her chair, waving her newspaper around in glee. “IT’S TONKS, YOU GUYS! OUR PREFECT IN 1989!”

“I am not taking points for that,” Pomona says with equal amounts of excitement.

Miss Windcharm snatches Miss Applebee’s paper from her long enough to read the section devoted to Nymphadora Tonks. “Holy shit! We have a Hufflepuff war mage!”

Pomona sighs. “All right. That I’ll take points for.”

Ravenclaw turns en masse to regard Filius at the staff table. “Sir?” Roshan squeaks.

“What?” Filius stares back at them with a smile, enjoying himself. “Is there something the matter, Mister Roshan?”

Padma Patil starts to giggle. “No, sir. Nothing’s the matter at all. Is there, guys?”

“Sir, I feel it necessary to warn you that your House is about to hoist you overhead and cart you out of this Hall,” Miss Fawcett says sweetly.

“At least I was done with breakfast,” is the last Nizar hears of Filius before the students do exactly as promised. Almost the entirety of Ravenclaw snatches up their war mage Head of House and makes off with him. Where they’re taking him, Nizar has no idea, but the departing group doesn’t seem bothered by the idea of a lacking destination.

It’s the Baby Death Eaters and Marked students in Ravenclaw who don’t join them. “They may as well hang a banner over their heads,” Severus mutters snidely. “‘Look at us; we’re complete idiots.’”

“At least there is not much attention being paid to them,” Nizar says. Hufflepuff is in the middle of loudly losing their minds for now having an Auror Hufflepuff war mage among their number, especially one that the upper years can recall attending school with. There is also a great deal of chatter regarding Fleur Delacour, who was a favorite of many to win the Triwizard Tournament last
When Nizar takes the time to finally read his own copy of the paper, he’s glad to see how much time Joyous spends extolling Miss Delacour’s education in Beauxbatons, her performance in the Tournament, her sportsmanship—Nizar wonders what that has to do with anything—and her immediate hiring after graduation by the British goblins, who were among the first to recognize her skill in magical warding. That she is betrothed to Bill Weasley doesn’t seem to bother anyone except Roger Davies.

“What is his problem?” Nizar asks, flicking one finger at Davies where he remains at the Ravenclaw table, sulking.

“He briefly dated Miss Delacour before she realized that she could find more intelligence in a tree stump,” Severus replies. They both glance over as the Slytherins begin to drift across the room, settling in with the Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors to help them celebrate their new war mages—and Fleur Delacour. Nizar overheard enough in the Common Room during the Tournament to know that much of Slytherin House respected her, even if they didn’t want her to win.

As if they desired to post another sign over their heads, only the Baby Death Eaters or Marked students sit with the remaining Ravenclaws. “You know, their idiocy is annoying, but it’s probably going to save their lives,” Nizar comments.

Severus rolls his eyes. “Nizar, that is the one and only instance in which I find idiocy to be acceptable.”

* * * *

Severus spends his free morning catching up on what grading had yet to be completed for all seven years of his students. With a war on, he cannot afford to fall behind, or else he’ll be buried in terrible essays by the end of term.

He grimaces as he unrolls Granger’s latest scroll. He should, perhaps, consider reinstating limits on her work. Granted, this is her extra credit effort of discerning what his Polyjuice variant does. Not only did she figure it out, but she expands on that recognition in order to name other variations. Some limit the efficacy of the potion, while other brews would keep anyone except the intended recipient from using the Polyjuice successfully. She even writes on how it might be possible to use animal hair safely in order to achieve an Animagus-like state, however briefly.

He puts her scroll down and rubs his forehead. God, he may well have created a monster.

Nizar Apparates into the room just before he would normally leave for lunch. “I’m kidnapping you,” he announces, “in the sense that neither of us are leaving this room, the elves are supplying lunch, and we don’t have to face anyone who is even slightly irritating except each other.”

“Oh, thank God,” Severus responds in appreciation. He tosses his quill down on his desk. “I didn’t want to spend lunch contemplating which idiot Marked student was going to attempt to kill one of us. I’m reserving that activity for later.”

“Similar thoughts had crossed my mind.”

“How did you spend your morning?” Severus asks once there is food before him. Shepherd’s Pie.
Normalcy. He appreciates that right now.

“Visited with Aberforth while we attended a few funerals,” Nizar replies, digging through the pie until he discovers the filling. “This isn’t beef. This is goat.”

Severus blinks and glances back down at his plate. “Why?”

“The visiting or the goat?”

“The bloody goat!”

“Maybe the elves are realizing that the Hogwarts menu was a bit staid. Even I noticed, and I’ve only been taking meals in this school since first November.” Nizar takes a bite. “It’s a nice change of flavor.”

Severus is not impressed. “It’s still a fucking goat.”

“Then they’re commenting on either our stubbornness, or they’re mocking Aberforth. Or, again, the much larger population of Hogwarts elves is pushing for an expanded menu. I know you eat bacon, so even if it weren’t kosher, that shouldn’t be a concern.”

“A goat’s ability to be kosher depends on who you ask as well as what the annoying little bastards have been eating,” Severus retorts. It is an interesting change of flavor. It’s not quite to his preference, but he doesn’t hate it.

“They should attempt a goat dish made the way the hindavī preferred,” Nizar says thoughtfully. “So much ginger and turmeric, though if you’ve suddenly taken it into your head to observe a Kosher diet, the dairy would be problematic. That first meal in the East turned my family into addicts for turmeric—saffron and cardamom, too. I always preferred the latter.”

“Turmeric for potions ingredients,” Severus points out. “No, I have not suddenly decided that my life requires the further complication of trying to figure out how to maintain a Kosher diet in a Scottish fucking castle.” The elves might oblige him if he asked, now that there are so many of them, but he is not willing to give up bacon.

“I never once put turmeric into Sana Visio. I wanted it to keep working,” Nizar drawls in response, amused. “Potions for reducing inflammation, however? Definitely those. I have an arthritis potion written up somewhere that Godric appreciated—early onset,” Nizar adds in explanation. “Certain of his formative years weren’t spent in the best of health, and then he compounded it all by picking up sword, shield, bow, and ax in order to kill the deserving. By the time he was forty, his hands and knees loathed him on rainy days.”

“No experimentation with ginger, then?”

“You and I both know that it works better in a potion if it’s powdered, not fresh, though gods know why,” Nizar says. Severus nods in recognition of the point. “When I was dealing with a populace that could have difficulties with the galla and not recognize it properly, it didn’t seem worth the risk. There were other potions available, and we ate most of our ginger before we could use it, anyway.”

Severus frowns. “Galla. Gallstones?”

“If that is what the ailment is currently called, then yes.” Nizar sips at his tea. “I really need to find a decent book on current medical terminology.”

“I could acquire it, but I want to see that arthritis potion in trade,” Severus says.
Nizar tilts his head and grins. “All right. One arthritis potion, still written in Cumbric. Unless you’ve another trade to offer, that is.”

Severus scowls back. “Did you have something in mind?”

Nizar reaches out and rests his arm on the table, palm up. Severus gives him a wary look before placing his hand over Nizar’s. “Your company this evening would be trade enough.”

Oh. Severus tightens his grip. “I believe that can be arranged.”

Nizar smiles. “Excellent. Oh, and Aberforth is using Madam Bones’s declaration of the Order of the Phoenix as an official extension of the M.L.E. to harass Dumbledore by actually attending meetings again.”

“It’s no longer Dumbledore issuing the primary alerts for Order meetings, is it?” Severus asks, realizing there is a pleased smile on his face.

“No, it is not. That would be Kingsley.” Nizar squeezes Severus’s hand before releasing him and standing up. “I’m really not certain what Dumbledore is going to do yet to compensate for the removal of that power, even if he is still considered the group’s leader. It will be fun to watch tomorrow morning. I’ll leave you to your next class of dubious O.W.L. students.”

“And I will most certainly see you later. I meant that trade,” Severus replies. Nizar grins again and disappears with silent Disapparition.

He’s almost given up trying to figure out how Nizar and Salazar do so. The right sort of trade to gain that knowledge would be far less frustrating.

After lunch comes the class Severus learned to dread before the first month of their first year was concluded—the now fifth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors. After over four years of hostilities between the two groups in a Potions classroom, Severus always spends their brewing Double in a state of heightened awareness, alert for terrible mishaps and misbehaving idiots. The only thing that has made up for that level of stress for the last four terms is the fact that his seventh-year N.E.W.T. double occurs right after the fifth-years depart.

It doesn’t matter that it is now nothing like it was; Severus remains tense. He no longer has to deliberately antagonize Potter, which is a relief, if still…odd. Longbottom is no longer causing weekly incidents, improving his brewing by using the secretive confines of Severus’s office to experiment. Finnigan’s incidents of explosive accidental magic diminished a great deal when he finally found a different method for dealing with that excess of energy—namely Dean Thomas. Mister Finnigan’s efforts seem lackluster today due to Mister Thomas’s current absence to attend to his mother’s funeral, but at least he is not so distracted that he is endangering himself.

Granger is the one distracted, often spending the entire class glaring at a cauldron as she brews personalized assignments and strives to understand how a potion truly melds instead of following rote directions. Parvati Patil and Daphne Greengrass work well together, as do Kellah Shafiq and Theodore Nott. Miss Shafiq is not present today due to her father’s funeral, so Nott is working with fellow Slytherin Richard Vaisey. Strange; Vaisey most often shares a cauldron with Tracey Davis, but she is currently working alone. Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini only collaborate when they need to, though Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode will sometimes create a terrifying Potions sextet with Thomas, Weasley, Finnigan, and Longbottom.

This group of idiots would be as close to harmonious as hormonal students ever get if it were not for the five exceptions that refuse to mature. Severus has always had troublemakers in Vincent Crabbe
and Gregory Goyle, something he’s lambasted them about in private. They’ve caused more than one dangerous incident in this classroom. He has told them often that a Potions environment is not an appropriate place to take any sort of revenge. The warning remains in their heads for perhaps a day or two before they’re up to foolishness again. Tracey Davis is an unrepentant Baby Death Eater and thus also bears watching, even if she usually behaves herself in his presence. Bernicia Blishwick and Fay Dunbar take their loathing of Slytherins out on Granger, their labeled House Traitor. It is most often hissed comments about Granger’s supposed crude doings with snakes. Unimaginative idiots. Lavender Brown joined in their hatred, but Severus suspects it’s some bizarre form of jealousy regarding Weasley, as she otherwise has no difficulties associating with Slytherins. That does not make her any less foolish.

Warrington’s warning preys on his thoughts as the class progresses. There are a few Marked idiots among the N.E.W.T. students this afternoon, though he hopes they are not foolish enough to stage an assault inside a Potions classroom—they could easily kill themselves in the process.

Later, he will find it fucking infuriating to realize that when the attack came, Severus was looking in the wrong direction entirely.

“Oh, watch it!” he hears Longbottom shout.

Severus grits his teeth before turning around to find Crabbe chortling while Goyle scuttles back to Crabbe’s side, looking pleased with himself. Longbottom’s cauldron has been dumped over and is leaking its smoky grey contents onto the workbench. Then that section of the workbench disappears, dropping the cauldron to the floor.

That…is not how that particular potion is supposed to work.

Longbottom looks at Severus in a panic as the potion spills across the floor. “Sir! It’s a plant-based Vanishing Potion!”

That’s all he needs to hear. Severus slices his wand through the air in a wide arc. The students are caught by the charm and flung against the classroom walls as the floor Vanishes beneath Severus’s feet. He plummets about a meter before he recalls himself enough to fly—just as something hard and heavy slams into his back.

Severus wakes up on the ground with gravel pressing itself into the side of his face. He blinks dust out of his eyes and sees nothing but dark, misshapen blurs. The only source of light is shining down from above. There is weight pinning him down. He cannot move; all he feels is ice.

What the hell happened?

“Severus!”

The shout echoes its way down to him, bouncing off the stone in sharp repetitions. “Nizar,” he tries to say, but all that emerges is a faint rasp that isn’t a word at all.

Nizar Apparates into place next to Severus, kneeling on the rubble near Severus’s head. His wand is casting blue-white light around them. Severus squints against the harsh brightness, but it allows him to see that he’s in some sort of chamber.

He’s surrounded by everything that was in his classroom but for his students. Worktables, desk, cauldrons, ingredients, chairs, school bags, the shattered remains of the blackboard, quills—even stones that cracked and fell when the rest of the floor supporting them Vanished.

“Gods, Severus.” Nizar rests his hand against the side of Severus’s face. He’s smiling, but it’s a
pinched, concerned expression that isn’t the slightest bit reassuring. “I know we Slytherins should always do things to the best of our ability, but this is a bit much.”

“Fu’you,” Severus mutters. He can feel gravel on his tongue. “Students?”

“They’re fine—well, they’re in shock, or they’re whinging about the fact that you pinned them to the wall with a really good Sticking Charm. Your classroom has no floor, by the way.”

Severus rolls his eyes and regrets it immediately. His head hurts like he’s suffered a bout of the Crucius Curse. “Out,” he orders. He means himself, but it’s difficult to concentrate on words. His thoughts want to be indistinct and murky rather than clear and sharp.

“I’ll get you out of here as soon as I think it’s safe to move you. Stay put.” Nizar casts a diagnostic spell that glimmers in the air just out of Severus’s line of sight. “Oh. You probably can’t move at all. I’m so glad that’s repairable.”

It takes a little while for the realization to filter in. “Paralyzed?” Severus asks in disbelief.

“Temporarily,” Nizar insists at once, but that sounds like truth, not panic. “At least it means you won’t be moving around while we’re clearing everything away.”

Severus glares at Nizar as best he can when he can’t lift his head. “Tell. Me.”

Nizar tilts his head to look upwards. “Salazar had to convince the castle to put some of the floor back around the edges of the classroom. Those among the staff who are capable are prying our Gryffindors and Slytherins off the walls. Longbottom is panicking about his potion killing you. I’m pondering the merits of killing Gregory Goyle.”

“Me first,” Severus growls, and Nizar chuckles. “Next?”

“After they’re safe, we’ll get you out of here, but it will take a few minutes. A lot of debris decided to say hello to you. Limited space and all.” Nizar looks around again. “I don’t know this room. It doesn’t even have doors. What was it for, I wonder?”

Severus swallows down dust and possible bits of stone. The contemplation of possibility is distracting, at least. “How far?”

“Depth?” Nizar asks, and Severus manages a faint nod. “Maybe two storeys. Three, if they were building to a shorter height. Honestly, it looks like a well, but it's square, and we didn’t have—” He pauses. “SAL! Did we have a well inside this castle?”

Severus is glad that this time, the staccato repetition of echoes is going up and away from his ears. “No!” Salazar’s shout sounds faint and distant. “What is it that’s down there, hermanito?”


“Almost done!” That isn’t Salazar, but Minerva. He had no idea she was back from Thomas’s funeral. It’s far too early.

“I AM GOING TO KILL GREG!” Draco Malfoy shouts as he is undoubtedly removed from the wall.

“You will have to wait in line,” Filius chides him. “Out, Mister Malfoy. We’ll take care of Professor Snape. You’ve all been excused from your classes for the rest of the day due to this incident.”
Severus huffs out an annoyed breath. “Soft.”

“Severus.” Nizar looks back down at him, brow furrowed. “We didn’t know anything had gone wrong. Sound doesn’t carry beyond your classroom. None of the students could get to their wands to cast a Patronus. If Minerva hadn’t checked the hands on her watch, we wouldn’t have known you were in trouble until twenty students missed their next class. It’s after three o’clock.”

He tries to remember what time it had been before Goyle had seen fit to be a dunderhead, but doesn’t succeed. “What watch?”

“Salazar gave it to her,” Nizar says. “It has one of those people-tracking variants built in. Say a name, and it adds a hand that tells you whether they’re safe, endangered, or unavailable. You were one of the first people that Minerva added.”

“Why?” Severus asks. That is stupid. Minerva has others to look after.

Nizar strokes the side of his face again. “Because she loves you, mi idiota.”

“Why?” Severus repeats again, scowling.

“Oh, aren’t you in a mood?” Nizar smiles. “Because you’re a good man, and you are her friend.”

“Rubbish,” Severus mumbles into the dust. His muddy thoughts cause him to lose the thread of their conversation. He regains consciousness when the weight pressing down on him is suddenly gone. It doesn’t help the cold feeling in his limbs, but it’s easier to breathe with that weight gone.

More voices are bouncing around the small chamber’s confines. It is no longer just Nizar down here, but also Minerva and Salazar.

“If we tried to take him through the halls, every student would be gawking.” Minerva sounds unhappy. “He wouldn’t appreciate that at all.”

“We’ll get the elves to take him straight to the Hospital Wing,” Salazar says. “It’s the gentlest form of transportation we have. I’d like to not jar that injury until Nizar and Poppy determine if it needs a more accomplished Healer to mend it.”

None of that sounds pleasant. Severus hopes Poppy is capable, or Nizar—anything is preferable to dealing with those bastards from St. Mungo’s.

“Severus.” Nizar’s voice is low and close to his ear. “Integrum petrification, followed by dormirse.”

A Body-Bind Spell, and what sounds like a sleeping charm. Severus nods, grateful for the warning. He doesn’t want to be injured, immobile, and bloody panicked.

The first spell, murmured by Salazar, doesn’t feel like it changes anything except to hold his head in a firm position. His last waking thought is of the intense desire to fling Gregory Goyle from the fucking bell tower.

*          *          *          *

“How did you not know Severus was in danger?” is the first thing Salazar asks of him after Severus is safely in Poppy’s healing clutches. “It’s part of your title, little brother.”
“I don’t know.” Nizar sits down on the nearest bed in the hospital wing, props his elbows on his knees, and rests his face in his hands. “I should have, and I didn’t.”

The bed shifts as Salazar sits next to him. “You cannot blame yourself for this. For all we know, this lack is a side effect from your time in the portrait, or from the Gaunt’s fucking meddling.”

“The meddling is more likely,” Nizar says. “If Obliviscaris omnia can destroy memory, perhaps it can destroy magical connections, as well.”

“Forget everything,” Salazar murmurs. “It is not outside the realm of possibility, but I’m not fond of the idea.”

“Nor am I. If that is true, then I either have to repair that connection, or pass on the title of Protectoris.” Nizar feels a cold chill as he speaks. Passing on the title is not something he wants to do when Voldemort is still a threat, but Hogwarts must have a competent and capable Protector, else there is no purpose to the role at all.

“Nizar.” Salazar wraps his arm around Nizar’s shoulders and pulls him in close. “Your Severus will be fine.”

“It was so close,” Nizar whispers, suddenly feeling choked. “If that fucking desk had come down at an angle that was so much as an inch different—”

“But it did not,” Salazar reminds him, his voice gentle. “It did not happen. Do not lock these feelings away, Nizar. Don’t make my mistake.”

“Orellana was a different matter entirely, and you know it.” Nizar takes a deep breath. He can taste the dust from the wreckage in the bottom of that chamber. Beneath it is the hint of blood, left behind by wounds that had bled while hidden from view by rubble. “Salazar, I can’t. If I release my hold on the Mind Magic and feel the whole of what is in my thoughts right now, I would kill Greg Goyle. He is a student under my protection, but he has attacked another under my protection, but he is still a child—gods, Sal. I might not have known that something was wrong in Severus’s classroom, but I can certainly feel the fucking conflict the magic is having right now!”

Salazar tightens his grip on Nizar. “Then that means the link is intact, and thus repairable, and we can prevent the lack of knowledge from ever occurring again. Focus on the solution, not the desire for revenge.”

“You can’t kill him either, Sal.”

“No, but it is beyond tempting to disguise myself, enter Voldemort’s Court, and kill Gregory Goyle’s useless parents,” Salazar growls. “That they have raised a child who is so callous regarding the lives of others, who is so fucking oblivious to the consequences of his actions—I would see them pay the price for what they nearly caused today.”


“Going among them at all is foolish, hermanito, and yet I’ve done it for a long time now.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.” Nizar lifts his head. “Go join the other Heads of House, Sal. You’re currently in the position of needing to act in Severus’s stead regarding Goyle, and whatever the hell we’re going to do about what he’s done.”

“We don’t yet know if it was deliberate malice or foolishness. That will be our first task.” Salazar
hesitates. “How did we deal with a student attempting the murder of another in our day? I cannot recall ever needing to do so, but that does not mean it never happened.”

“I think—once.” Nizar tries to concentrate on a memory that wants to evade him. He reaches out to Hogewáþ and asks for her assistance, and then he has it. Not clear, not as it should be, but he can determine events. “A fourteen-year-old magician. I don’t recall her name. She attempted to kill…one of our teachers. She did not repent of her actions; her only regret was that she failed to make them dead.” Them. That is a clue. “We had a staff member without a chosen gender. Who?”

Salazar snaps his fingers when recognition strikes. “Phytheon. They were the first teacher of art that came to the school. Galiena learned from them.”

“That is who this student attempted to kill, then. I don’t even recall her reasoning. We banished her, Sal. We took her wand and banished her.”

“Fuck.” Salazar sits up and runs his hands through his short hair. “Even if the lad is guilty of intentional malice, we cannot do that here. That would only result in young Mister Goyle running off to join his family in Voldemort’s Court, and then we would face an underage magician on a field of battle. Children were killed for participating in Voldemort’s last war, hermanito. I’d prefer not to stumble over such corpses again.”

“So would I.” Nizar grapples with that elusive memory, hoping for better news to give his brother. “Look to the charta, Sal. There might be an answer within its pages that we’ve forgotten, one that was meant for a situation exactly like this.”

“Wartime provisions.” Salazar nods and stands up. “You’ll be all right here?”

Nizar manages to smile. “Yes. I’m not leaving this hospital wing until I know—until there is certainty, and even then, you probably won’t be able to pry me out until Severus is capable of telling Poppy to bugger off.”

As if he’d sent for her, Poppy peers around the corner of the private room she’s granted to Severus. “Nizar? I know you’re healer-trained, if not a master of the art. If you’re capable of doing so right now, I could use the assistance.”

Nizar and Salazar share one more look before his brother leaves the hospital wing. He follows Poppy into Severus’s room. All of the superficial wounds caused by falling debris and sharp edges have been healed, and shine with the application of fresh Dittany. Salazar’s original spell is still in place, holding Severus immobile. “The spinal damage is your concern?”

“Yes. I can cast a diagnostic and see to repairing the damage, but not both at the same time. This is the sort of work in which you should be able to see exactly what your magic is doing as you perform it. I would also like your opinion as to whether we should rely on magical repair, potions, or a blend of the two,” Poppy says briskly.

Nizar takes a breath and exhales slowly, willing tension and fear to leave him be, before he lifts his wand. “I’ll cast the diagnostic, then, and we’ll see what needs to be done.”

It’s blended work, magical repair supplemented by healing potions that have been designed to be absorbed through the skin. It’s a brilliant invention and Nizar says so—much more efficient than trying to convince an unconscious body to swallow liquid.

“The Muggles use intravenous lines for the application of medicine to the unconscious, as well, but I’m not yet confident in attempting the same. It requires specific training,” Poppy explains,
examining the diagnostic spell that glows above Severus’s body. “A needle is inserted in order to place a thin tube within the arm or the leg, and that tube is attached to a fluid line fed by a hanging bag. It’s brilliant, but getting magicians to accept new things…”

“If I’m recalling what I’ve heard correctly, that is not new,” Nizar says dryly.

Poppy huffs in annoyance. “By magical standards, it is. Nizar…during the last war, St. Mungo’s was overwhelmed. People died because they didn’t have the staff to handle the influx of wounded caused by You-Know-Who’s Death Eaters. Things have not improved since that time. If there are to be battles, I am going to need assistance, and if that assistance is also in the form of Muggle devices, then so be it.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“I have,” Poppy says. “I’ve thought on it since last Friday. Here it is only a week later, and I have a patient in my hospital wing who could already have fallen victim to You-Know-Who’s bloody war.”

Nizar’s hand tightens around his wand until his knuckles turn white. “I’m quite aware of that, yes. I’ll look into acquiring assistance for you.” There might be options among Squibs who trained in medicine when the magical community rejected them, or vice versa. That would enable any assistants to see the castle without making special arrangements.

Poppy loses her fierce frown and reaches out to pat his arm. “I’m sorry, dear. I know that this is… personal.”

Nizar looks down at Severus, whose expression has finally eased from pained and pinched. He is relaxed in unconscious repose now that potions and magic have done their work. He will be able to rest on his back for the remainder of the recovery process, which could be anywhere from several hours to several days. It’s different for everyone, Nizar learned from Helga, individual to each body as they figured out how to map the regenerated paths of movement.

That ax to his shoulder. Nizar remembers a bit more of the recovery, and recalls hating every moment of it aside from his gratitude that his arm was still attached to his body. He was not one to linger in unconsciousness, and those regenerating pathways had sarding itched and burned.

He’d refused the potions and spells that would have let him sleep through the process. Consoling Elfric—convincing Elfric that he was not to blame—had been far more important.

“That’s all we can do for now.” Poppy pats his arm again. “I assume you’ll be staying with him?”

“Yes.” Nizar relaxes his hand so the carved runes of his wand are no longer being impressed into his palm. “Until we know whether Mister Goyle’s act was deliberate, he should not be left without a guard.”

Poppy’s eyes narrow. “Do you believe it to be?”

“It could have been. There have been whispers among the Marked students of making attempts against certain targets in the school.” Nizar shakes his head. “But Greg isn’t Marked, and he has always been foolish, no matter our attempts to teach him otherwise. He may well have been attempting to taunt a Gryffindor without realizing what sort of consequences might result. I truly do hope it’s the latter. I don’t know what we’ll do if this was a deliberate act of harm.”

Harm. Plots. “Poppy. May I have your permission to cast a warding circle before this particular door? It won’t affect anyone who comes into this room if they’ve no intent to cause harm, but if they cross into that circle with ill intent, they will regret it.”
“By killing them?” Poppy asks with a raised eyebrow.

“I am Protectoris, not executioner,” Nizar retorts.

“Very well. You have my permission to do so, but I would like the ward removed when I declare that my patient is allowed to depart,” Poppy says. “I’ll leave you be for now. I need to write a letter and send for another supply of one of the potions we used.”

Nizar waits until she is safely ensconced in her office before he casts the warding circle. This one is not Pictish, which tend to be a bit more intense, but Norse—or maybe Saxon. Helga and Godric had an interesting magical education between the pair of them. Those are Anglo-Saxon runes, but Helga knew of their use, too.

When the magic is done, the sigils no longer visible upon the floor, Nizar finds a chair. He drags it to Severus’s bedside and sits down, dropping his wand on the small table nearest the bed. He reaches out to brush Severus’s black hair away from his face, smoothing out the tangles that resulted from both the fall and from Poppy’s cleansing charms. Severus’s chest is rising and falling with the slight, gentle breaths of drugged slumber.

There are marks of Dittany on his face. Nizar even finds Dittany along Severus’s neck, marking healed injuries that were very close to arteries that are far too willing to bleed.

“Oh, gods, Severus,” Nizar whispers, and finally succumbs to tears of rage and relief.
Intrigues

Chapter Summary

Some things would be so much easier if Myrddin wasn't such a secretive bastard, but sometimes he was a secretive bastard for good reasons rather than convenient ones.

Sometimes. Rarely. (Almost never.)

Chapter Notes

Someone shoved the third marker into place rather awesomely this morning. Thank you. <3

Also, it's a longer chapter to make up for the previous cliffhanger.

Severus awakens to a familiar voice, but isn’t some unknown Healer from St. Mungo’s. It’s Nizar, and Severus thinks he might be reading. The words remain indistinct, uninterpretable.

Oh. Lovely. He’s still drugged. He deliberately chooses to go back to sleep just to avoid the aftereffects of what must have been at least two pain potions, and God knows what else.

He wakes again much later. The candles and torches are lit in the Hospital Wing to push back the night’s darkness. He’s in a private room, and he owes Poppy so many favors for granting him that courtesy.

Another bright point: he longer feels chilled to the bone. Instead, he aches, but he’s felt worse. Far more important is the fact that he can think again, which has always been vital to his existence.

Nizar is reading aloud. Severus focuses his attention to listen.

“Duchesse, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off.”

“You overpower me madame, with the kindness of your language.”

“No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, Duchesse.”

“Your Majesty is too kind in remembering it.”

“Not so. Give me a proof of your friendship, Duchesse.”

“My whole being is devoted to you, madame.”[1]

There is a pause. “Were they courting each other?” Nizar wonders. Severus releases a silent laugh; he’d begun to wonder the same thing.
“Severus?”

“What the bloody hell are you reading?” Severus whispers, looking over to find Nizar balancing on a chair at his side, his feet propped on the bedside table.

Nizar glances down at the book before he closes it, letting the chair thump back down onto the floor. “The Vicomte of Bragelonne. Specifically, The Man in the Iron Mask. Salazar suggested it. The political intrigue began on page one and hasn’t stopped. I think I might be having flashbacks to Court at this point.”

“You’re reading one of the sequels first?” Severus asks, blinking a few times to gain more focus. Now he can make out the gold lettering on the book’s cover and spine, though it’s worn and faded. The book is bound in leather, not paper, making him wonder how old that copy is.

“No, you slept through The Three Musketeers and Twenty Years Later, which is probably for the best.” Nizar puts the book on the small table next to the bed. “The main character started out as such a complete stereotypical Gryffindor that even I wanted to throttle him. The author also compared him to Don Quixote so many times that I then wanted to strangle an author who is, alas, very dead.”

Three books. Severus grimaces. “What day is it?”

“Saturday evening.” Nizar glances at his watch. “Nearly nine o’clock. How are you?”

Severus considers it and then wiggles his fingers and toes. “I hurt, but that is far preferable to the alternative.”

“It is. I told Poppy I was not going to interrupt her rest if you awoke before morning. Hold still so she’ll be appeased,” Nizar instructs. He casts the same diagnostic spell he’d used in the…chamber? Well? He still isn’t certain what was beneath his Potions classroom.

Severus can see the image now, which a cloudy, fog-like image of the human body traced by colored lines. It doesn’t quite resemble Poppy’s diagnostic charm, or any Healer’s version he’s yet seen. “Helga’s charm?”

“One of them.” Nizar studies the lines of yellow and green that trace along every single part of the foggy blue impression of form. “I don’t remember the Norse having a name for the nervous system, but they understood that those paths existed. The green shows that the damage is repaired and everything is working the way it should. The yellow is pain. If it were worse pain than you admitted to, it would be veering towards…red? I think it’s red. Sometimes reds are hard to read when set against blue.” Nizar dismisses the charm. “But you are. You’re fine.”

Severus thinks Nizar might be saying those words to reassure himself rather than Severus. “I am, yes. Why have you—have you been reading to me the entire time?”

Nizar glances at the book. “You used to do the same for me.”

“Nizar.”

“All right! It was something to do aside from trying to murder an underage student or otherwise panicking,” Nizar admits. “Dammit.”

Severus drags his hands out from beneath a sheet and blanket that feel too heavy and holds it out in silent request until Nizar relents and grips Severus’s hand. “Please tell me why you want to murder a student.”
Nizar sighs. “Because it was deliberate, Severus. Gregory Goyle knew what Longbottom was
working on, and somehow he found out that Longbottom had been working on controlling
overpowered potions. He didn’t tip the cauldron just to be a prick to a Gryffindor.”

Severus really wants to be shocked by this. Maybe he is on some deep, subconscious level that is not
yet in the mood to contemplate the idea. A Slytherin of his House not only caused a deliberate,
dangerous accident in his classroom, but they meant it with murderous intent. “Fuck.”


“Who did Gregory Goyle intend to kill, Nizar?” Severus asks. “Longbottom?”

“Not merely Longbottom, but anyone Gryffindor on that side of the room. Greg, as usual, was
oblivious to the fact that there were Slytherins working near Longbottom’s cauldron. If the potion
spread far enough, he had you in mind as a target, as well.”

Severus has no trouble believing that at all. “Because he thinks I’m a traitor to Slytherin, and to
Voldemort.” There remain many students in their House who feel that way, despite the copious
evidence in the form of two ancient Slytherins teaching Hogwarts classes and waving wands in their
faces.

“Miss Frobisher attempted to melt Miss Condor’s prosthetic leg, and Mister Chambers cast that
fucking Melting Hex at Miss Parkinson. Why do the other Heads of House want to expel Mister
Goyle, but not the other two?” Severus’s first instinct is to think it’s because Goyle is a Slytherin, but
he now trusts Minerva not to make that blunder. Even when he didn’t trust her, she did her utmost to
be fair to all Slytherins.

“You don’t recall?” Nizar asks in surprise.

“I am most certainly still drugged,” Severus responds in annoyance.

“Neither student had been informed as to the Melting Hex’s true nature. Miss Frobisher believed the
hex only to have acted as it did because it struck a prosthetic limb, and didn’t intend murder.
Chambers was only told that the hex would have interesting results, not that it could easily be fatal. If
he’d really wanted Pansy and Hermione dead, he would have attempted the Killing Curse instead of
a mere hex. Goyle, unfortunately, would have had no regrets if he’d killed you or any Gryffindor in
the classroom. He’s utterly convinced he was doing the proper thing, Severus.”

Severus nods, though it makes his neck ache to do so. “Where is Goyle now?”

“Goyle is being kept in a private room on the lower floor of the hospital wing, under guard by two
borrowed Aurors.” Nizar’s smile is sharp-edged, just as it had been for greeting Death Eaters at
Narcissa’s Christmas dinner gathering. “Most students of our House hexed him out of the Slytherin
dormitories. Then he had to face off against Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and Ravenclaw, and all of them
so very angry. Goyle endangered Gryffindors and Slytherins alike, and you could have died. It will
take quite a while for some of those spells to wear off.”

Severus stares at him. “What?”

Nizar glances down and sees the expression on his face. “You still don’t realize it, do you? Severus,
in the last few months, you’ve earned the respect of quite a number of students simply by being you,
rather than acting the part of Dumbledore’s spy. As to the rest? Those were not idle words the
students spoke when they learned that you were a war mage. You are their war mage, and they mean
it in a way that Albus Dumbledore will never understand.”
“That’s…” Severus resists the urge to be derisive. At the moment, he doesn’t think Nizar would respond well to any form of self-castigation. “Why?”

“Those who know what a war mage is capable of, and why, informed everyone who didn’t.” Nizar runs his thumb along the top of Severus’s hand, which is still showing a fading pink line of what must have been a deep slice from falling debris. “One cannot become a titled war mage unless they mean the vows they take. The students of Hogwarts know that you would literally sacrifice yourself to safeguard their well-being, Severus. It doesn’t matter if you are caustic, or if they find you unpleasant. The deeper truth is evident by the title you bear.”

“I’m not certain I know what to do with that information,” is all Severus can think to say.

“You don’t need to do anything,” Nizar says. “It’s simply an existing truth. Close your eyes. I’ll put you back to sleep with long and drawn-out political intrigue.”

“That won’t work. Political intrigue is interesting,” Severus retorts, but still fails to remain awake past the end of the conversation full of double entendre between Countess and Queen.

* * * *

“Is he well?”

Nizar glances up from The Man in the Iron Mask, annoyed to be interrupted just as all of the intrigue is culminating in the book’s climax—rather early, at that. “He is,” Nizar tells Dumbledore. “Severus woke up a few hours ago. We held a brief conversation before the rest of our healing work sent him right back to slumber.”

It’s also annoying to see that Dumbledore is not being affected by the warding circle. Good intentions. Well—had he not wanted those of the man?

Dumbledore gazes at Severus’s sleeping form. He has gotten more restless, turning the blanket and sheet into a twisted mess rather than flat stillness. “I am very glad to hear that.”

“You care for him.”

“Of course I do.” Dumbledore looks at Nizar carefully, as if expecting an accusation. When it does not come, he makes his confession anyway. “Do you know how he came to spy for the Order?”

Nizar inclines his head. “We’ve discussed it once or twice, yes.”

“When he asked to meet with me in autumn of 1980, I immediately assumed the worst. I had been doing so for years of war by then, and it seemed…proper, I suppose,” Dumbledore says. “I treated him fouly, Nizar. I castigated him on that hillside for speaking of concern for no one but Lily Potter. It was only later that I realized I was hearing what I expected, rather than what was said. When Severus first asked for protection for those threatened by the Prophecy I shared with you, he asked it of Lily’s entire family, not just Lily herself.

“I was ashamed of my actions that night. I’d always prided myself on my ability to listen, and yet I had to wonder, then, exactly how much I’d never heard because I wasn’t listening any longer—guilt made worse when Severus informed me of how Voldemort was capable of using the Dark Mark to kill any Death Eater who displeased him. Death was the only escape for those who regretted
accepting the Mark.”

Dumbledore sighs. “I ordered him to spy for me in exchange for the Potter family’s protection, but we both knew it was no fair trade at all. Until Voldemort was defeated, Severus had no choice but to act as a spy, to continue to emulate perfect loyalty, else the Dark Lord would have caused his immediate death.

“I made many mistakes during the war. My treatment of Severus was only one of them. I do not wish to continue to make those same mistakes.”

No, instead you made different ones entirely, Nizar thinks. “You’re concerned about what decision the Heads of House may make in regards to Goyle’s punishment for Friday afternoon.”

“I am, yes,” Dumbledore admits. “While something must be done, I would prefer to send a message that would discourage others who might emulate Mister Goyle’s behavior. I want none of them encouraged into rushing off to join Voldemort.”

“If it reassures you at all, my brother and I do not want to see that happen, either.”

“I thought not. You are both very kind, even when tempers fray,” Dumbledore acknowledges. For some reason, that stirs Nizar’s temper, but he has no idea why. The words were not even spoken in the Headmaster’s oft-condescending tone. “When Severus awakens again, please inform him that Mister Vaisey of Slytherin sends his understanding in regards to Severus no longer being able to accompany him to his brother Thomas’s funeral on Saturday afternoon. The attending family toasted to Severus’s safe recovery.”

Nizar smiles. “He may well refuse to believe that.”

“He often does not believe it when others think highly of him,” Dumbledore says. “I’m off to sleep before Sunday morning brings any new difficulties. I suggest you attempt the same, Nizar.”

“Of course,” Nizar replies in a neutral voice, while thinking, Not bloody likely.

Dumbledore mentioned nothing of the Order meeting that was meant to take place Saturday morning, just before the multitude of funerals. Nizar can’t wait to find out from more useful sources how the meeting went, and who might’ve started the latest pissing contests.

He gets his wish: the next visitor to the infirmary is Sirius Black. “Nizar. How are you?” Sirius asks after stepping into the private room and closing the door behind him.

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “I’m not the one who was nearly crushed by the entire contents of a classroom.”

Sirius makes a derisive noise. “I’m not certain how Snape managed it. He’s usually better about not being caught. At anything.”

Oh, Nizar is not in the mood for this. Granted, Sirius hasn’t been in this sort of mood since the magical titles were bestowed. Nizar suspects something else is the cause. “I would imagine Severus was a bit busy saving the lives of the Slytherin and Gryffindor students, who all survived the incident without injury.”

“Yeah. That’s true.” Sirius stares at Severus’s sleeping form, but his expression is no longer one of derision, or anything remotely mocking. “Bugger, I’m going to have to be an adult about things, aren’t I?”
“Are you capable of such a miraculous act?” Nizar asks dryly.

Sirius rolls his eyes. “God, but you sound just like Lily. I’m bloody working on it, Nizar.”

Nizar reminds himself that it is Saturday, and many funerals took place yesterday and today. “I take it Edith Pettigrew’s funeral did not go well.”

“Oh, the service was nice enough. They’re a strictly Pure-blooded family, but they’ve always had a bit more taste.” Sirius leans against the wall. “Enid might well have been made of granite the entire time, but she’s furious. She just wants the opportunity to have a rat at the end of her wand, even if she had to spear the rat to make it happen.”

“Peter Pettigrew couldn’t be bothered to attend, then.”

Sirius blows out a frustrated breath. “If he did, it was under an excellent choice of Polyjuiced appearance. No one attended who was unexpected, and as far as Remus, Tonks, and I have been able to determine, every single one of those present were who they claimed to be. Remus even tried sniffing him out, but it’s not yet close enough to the full moon to determine the difference between magicked scent and something else hiding beneath it. All he got for it was a noseful of fresh dirt and…well, Preservation Charms do the job well enough, but only when they’re applied immediately.”

“I’m certain it was unpleasant,” Nizar says of the latter. “It could have been worse, though. Embalming fluid.” One of his Slytherin Half-blood students in the early twentieth century was the child of an undertaker, and could describe in vivid detail exactly what chemicals went into the preservation of a corpse when magic wasn’t involved.

Sirius looks nauseated. “Lily did explain non-magical preservation techniques when we attended her parents’ funerals. I’ll pass on experiencing anything like that ever again.”

Nizar nods. He’d prefer to avoid the embalming fluids, too. “And how are you?”

“Fantastic. I’m hating the fact that fucking Death Eaters went after the Pettigrews, and that they managed to kill Peter’s mother in the process. She didn’t deserve it, no matter what Peter turned out to be like. Edith was always a kind woman, even when all four of us were being complete shits.” Sirius shoves his hands into his pockets. “I really thought they’d leave her alone. Enid, no, not with her on the Wizengamot, but I really didn’t think they’d do something that would directly endanger that traitor’s mother. Stupid, right?”

“Not really. You were only hoping for the best outcome in a terrible situation.” Nizar would label that naïve, but he’s a pessimistic bastard. “How was the Order meeting?”

Sirius waves one hand in the air dismissively. “Bloody dull, for the most part. There was a bit of discussion about how You-Know-Who targeted Bones and Scrimgeour to clear the way for Thickenesse to take the Minister’s seat, but aside from agreement that Thickenesse would make a good Death Eater mouthpiece even if he isn’t one, not much else was said. Most of the meeting was spent dealing with the formality of becoming a legal body within the M.L.E., swearing in a few over-excited Aurors who wanted to join, that sort of thing. The only other thing of note was Dumbledore using the phrase *For the Greater Good* in front of the entire Order during his speech to welcome the new people. Some of those idiots wanted to immediately make it an official Order motto until Moody was kind enough to remind the stupid shits that they’d be copying Grindelwald’s motto, and whose side were we really on?”

Nizar feels a wash of fury blended with relief. “I’m so glad that man is a cranky, paranoid bastard.”
“Same.” Sirius’s smile has a lot of canine displeasure in it. “Kingsley didn’t say anything about that motto, but he’s not stupid. Now that Moody’s drawn attention to Dumbledore’s favorite little saying, he’s going to be thinking long and hard as to why the leader of the Order would still be parroting Grindelwald.”

“Excellent.” Nizar was hoping someone would start to dwell on it without that fact being shoved into their bloody faces. “Did any discussion of the Dementors happen?”

“Only that we should be on the alert for them to be found roaming anywhere in fucking Britain,” Sirius replies. “Why?”

Nizar tries not to growl under his breath. “Why am I not surprised?” he mutters. “That’s news that will keep, for now. It’s a subject I should be discussing when I’m not considering the benefits of sleeping with my face crammed into a book.”

Sirius nods, taking another brief look at Severus before returning his attention to Nizar. “I should head back. Do you need anything before I leave? Maybe a softer book?”

Nizar shakes his head, smiling. “Go home, Sirius. Toast Edith’s memory with anyone else who knew her, get shit-faced, and drink a good hangover cure in the morning.”

“That is an excellent plan,” Sirius decides. “Good night, Nizar.”

“Good night, Sirius.”

When Poppy wakes for a two o’clock early-morning check of her patient and hears that Severus woke on his own, it takes a full ten minutes to send her back to bed. Maybe now that it’s gone so late, people will let him read the rest of this stupid book in peace.

Nizar snaps awake at dawn to Salazar exclaiming, “We’ve got it!”

He briefly contemplates throwing the book at Salazar, but the book didn’t do anything to deserve it. “Got what? Bad timing? A pressing need to run before I chase after you for startling the fuck out of me?”

Salazar looks apologetic and tucks the original copy of the school’s *charta* under his arm. “I’m sorry, little brother. I hadn’t realized you were asleep, given how you seemed to be staring down at the last page of that book.”

Nizar rubs at his eyes, which are irritated by what must have been a very sudden, brief sleep. “No, I was done reading. I believe I was contemplating how much I wanted to strangle Dumas again before I nodded off.”

“I thought you would enjoy it,” Salazar says. “It has the sort of intrigue you thrive upon.”

“Oh, it was a fine and delightful mess of intrigue until it ended with everyone fucking dying,” Nizar retorts crossly.

“Oh.” Salazar eyes the book in displeasure. “My apologies, little brother. It’s been a while since I’ve read the books. I’d forgotten that part.”

“It’s fucking Alexandre Dumas,” Severus mutters, revealing that Salazar’s sudden entrance woke him, as well. “I could have warned you that everyone would die. I don’t think he knew how to write the end of a story without killing everyone.”
“The Count of Monte Cristo,” Salazar counters. “Good morning, Severus.”

“Marie bloody Antoinette,” Severus replies. “Does my classroom still lack a floor?”

“We thought you’d like to oversee the repairs, given how extensive they’ll be,” Salazar says without acknowledging the counterpoint. “But we have a solution to young Mister Goyle’s situation. Given that you are both now awake, I’ll tell the others we’ll wait until after breakfast to inform you of it.”

Severus shoves the heels of his palms into his eyes. “I don’t care as long as there is fucking tea.”

“Tea should never be mistaken as a substitute for a good slick,” is Salazar’s parting remark. He Disapparates before Nizar can lift his arm to throw the book directly into his brother’s face.

“Pendejo,” Nizar mutters. He glances over to see that Severus has not moved his hands from his eyes, which doesn’t hide the fact that he’s blushing. “So: tea, then?”

“Yes!” Severus snaps.

* * * *

Severus is allowed out of bed for breakfast under two conditions. The first is to allow Poppy to fret over him like he’s still a hapless student, which he tolerates. Even though she can be short-tempered, Poppy has never been anything but honest in her concerns. The other condition is that he eats breakfast before leaving the hospital wing, which isn’t a hardship. When the elves bring the tray, he finally has the bloody bedamned tea.

The only difficulty during the meal lies in convincing Nizar to join him. Nizar wasn’t exaggerating in the slightest when he told Severus that he doesn’t eat well when distressed, but it’s a trend that Severus would prefer to see ended. When simple cajoling won’t work, Severus loses his temper and yells that he is not dead or dying, or even remotely incapacitated, so eat a fucking egg or else.

Nizar stares at him until they both start laughing over the breakfast tray. At least after that, Nizar eats breakfast with him. It wouldn’t be enough to appease Poppy, but Severus still counts it as a victory.

Being given clean clothing is a welcome escape from the confines of a hospital wing dressing gown. The pyjamas he wears were Transfigured from the clothes he wore Friday, but given the tears and damage the cloth would have suffered, he has already written all of it off as a complete loss.

At least he wasn’t wearing Nizar’s gifted robe. Severus doubts it would have been damaged due to its magical nature, but if anyone had Transfigured that ancient cloth, he would have turned them inside-out in retaliation.

Once he emerges from the private room he resided in for half the weekend, buttoning a sleeve and glad to be wearing his own robes again, Nizar returns Severus’s wand. “Unbreakable shield knot,” he comments. “Though it did need a good cleaning afterwards.”

Severus examines his wand from end to end. Not even the black stain on the wood has been marred by its sudden journey into a debris-filled pit. “Thank you.”

Whatever Nizar might have said in response is interrupted by the sudden appearance of the Carrow twins on the floor right in front of him. Severus stares down at them, one eyebrow raised. They are
not only unconscious, but look to be wrapped up in aged fishermen’s nets.

Nizar prods Hestia with his booted foot. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Not that I lack appreciation for the visual, but what just caused them to be dumped at my feet?”

Severus asks.

“Oh, I put a warding circle in front of your room on Friday. If anyone wandered into it with ill intent…” Nizar smiles, but it is not a kind expression. “If they keep this up, they are going to share in whatever solution the others have discovered for Goyle.”

“Given that I am just about at my wits’ end? The temptation to have these two twits join him is beyond tempting,” Severus growls. “Poppy! You have idiots to see to!”

Poppy comes out of her office, her eyebrows rising the moment she spies the net-wrapped twins on the floor. “Oh, the warding circle. Should I do anything in particular with them? Cast them out into the Black Lake as bait, perhaps?”

“Gods, don’t tempt me,” Nizar replies. “They’ll need to be monitored until they awaken, most likely very confused. Oh, and that netting will only be removed by magic. I suggest waiting until after they’re done screaming in thwarted vexation to do so. Then please do hand them off to Argus. He’s been getting rather creative in what he’s having the students clean within this castle in order to… distract them.”

Poppy chuckles in grim amusement. “I’ll see to it, then. Severus, I know you intend to see to your classroom at once. Take your time on the walk. If anything changes or moving becomes difficult, tell Nizar, and then immediately get your arse back into this hospital wing.”

Severus nearly takes a step back. He doesn’t think he has ever heard Poppy Pomfrey swear in his entire life. “Certainly.” He would prefer to avoid asking the next question, but the Hufflepuff will be in his classroom soon. He needs to know. “How is Mister Finch-Fletchley doing?”

Poppy sighs. “I’ve already had to give the lad a Calming Draught this morning, though I warned him he would not receive another until he returns to Hogwarts this evening. I have no doubt that this is going to be terrible. If he finishes his fifth-year, it will be because he is using schoolwork as a distraction from his grief.”

“If so, Mister Finch-Fletchley will bear watching so he doesn’t make himself ill in the process,” Nizar says.

Poppy sighs in agreement. “I’ve no idea if he will, not yet. I’m afraid we’ll find out soon enough.”

Severus has barely set foot beyond the hospital wing’s doors when he has a blonde-haired growth named Astoria Greengrass attached to his hip. “Sir! You’re all right!”

“I did tell you louts that he was fine,” Nizar says, addressing the other Slytherins that gathered to lie in wait for Severus’s escape from the hospital wing. His Prefects for each year are present, which Severus appreciates, but with them are the Prefects from the other three Houses, Head Boy Neil Randall, Head Girl Tamsin Applebee…and for some unfathomable reason, the Weasley twins.

“We had to bribe our way into being present,” Fred says when Severus glares at him, demanding an explanation. “Otherwise, it was only going to be the Prefects and the Heads. Figured we should round out the representation, like.”

“I bribed Pansy,” Astoria explains proudly. She beams up at Severus before letting go. He’s grateful
for her timing; in another few moments he would have been attempting to escape, and he doesn’t wish to insult her.

Miss Granger speaks next, her tone surprisingly dry. “We’re the only ones with freedom of movement right now, bribery-induced company aside. We Prefects are still charged with keeping an eye out for wayward students, even if that’s the only thing we’re allowed to do. Everyone else is… indisposed.”

“Indisposed,” Severus repeats. Granger’s shielding is good, but she still needs to work on controlling her expression. She is pleased by something that’s occurred, and he doubts it was his sudden introduction to the space below his classroom floor. No; Granger has decided that she approves of him, which is as gratifying as it is highly fucking irritating.

George grins. “How did Professor McGonagall word it?”

“Students are not to leave their dormitories except for classroom attendance, mealtimes, and currently assigned detentions until the month has passed,” Miss Parkinson recites rather smugly. “If caught out, then those new detentions are to be served with whoever is in the worst mood among the staff, and I’m still not sorry.”

“None of us are.” Miss Bhatia has a fierce scowl on her face. “Trying to murder every Slytherin and Gryffindor in fifth-year, and trying to off my head of House? Absolutely not!”

Right. Nizar did tell him that all four Houses were rather incensed with Goyle. “Not that I am unappreciative of your claimed vengeance, but it would be far more in line with the ideals of our House if you’d not gotten caught,” Severus reminds his Prefects.

Higgs shrugs. “Professor, we made such a ruckus that subtlety was a lost cause the moment we heard Goyle bragging about what he’d done to…well. You know who he’d most likely want to air that sort of dirty laundry in front of, sir.”

“Indeed.” Severus doesn’t smile, but those who are familiar with the nuances of his expressions will be aware of his approval. “Odd; does the month of March not end next Sunday?”

The gathered students all look properly unassuming. “Imagine that,” Draco says in mild tone. “I could have sworn she meant our actions warranted a month of punishments, not a mere week.”

“Well, Professor McGonagall was obviously distressed at the time. I’m sure she’ll correct that mistake if we remind her,” Miss Applebee comments, looking rather gleeful.

“Too bad no one’s going to be saying a word,” Randall adds.

Severus looks at each student in turn: Prefects Weasley and Miss Granger, Malfoy and Miss Parkinson, Boot and Miss Brocklehurst, Rivers and Miss Bones, Kartik and Miss Johar, Miss O’Flaherty and Cadwallader, Higgs and Miss Bhatia, Roshan and Miss Edgecombe. Then he glances at Miss Greengrass, Randall, Miss Applebee, and the Weasley twins.

“As you have all decided to involve yourselves so thoroughly in this matter, and you represent all four Houses, I am going to ask a question of you that I normally would not.” Severus maintains his impassive stare. “Mister Goyle is underage, and thus cannot be imprisoned in Azkaban. Do you believe he should be expelled for his actions? Before you answer me, bear in mind that he will immediately join his family among the Death Eaters, even if he is too young to bear the Dark Mark. If he is fool enough to dump out a powerful potion and nearly kill himself along with everyone else in the room, Mister Goyle is certainly foolish enough to join a battle against seasoned Aurors.”
“And war mages,” Fred mutters.

“If we did that, we might as well be executing him,” Granger spits, “and I’d rather count myself as a better person than Cornelius bloody Fudge! Sir,” she adds.

Severus decides he can magnanimous about not taking points. He shares her opinion of the man, dead or not.

“We might have overheard the other Heads of House discussing a solution,” George says with a poor attempt at wide-eyed innocence.

“Did you? Please do share with the rest of us,” Nizar requests. “They’ve not even told us yet.”

Roshan nudges Granger. “Go on, Magical Encyclopedia: you’re the one who ran off to read up on it the moment the twins reported on what they heard.”

“Right.” Granger subconsciously straightens in place. “In the original Hogwarts’ school charter, a student who did something like Goyle attempted would be banished from the castle, but there are wartime provisions. If a student proves themselves to be an enemy combatant, but they’re underage by the accepted standard, then that student can be expelled from Hogwarts, but not ejected from it. They’re to be granted a separate living space, away from all other students—not necessarily something nice, just properly habitable. The enemy student isn’t really meant to be locked away, not like jail, but they’re only allowed outside of those rooms under strict supervision. They can take no classes; they cannot take meals with the other students; they cannot serve apprenticeships or, in the updated rules, sit the O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s. They’re supposed to be shunned by everyone else within Hogwarts unless they require necessary medical attention. Oh, and their wand is snapped,” she adds, almost as an afterthought.

“It seemed a bit harsh, at first, but the banished student can earn their way back into everyone’s good graces,” Draco says, lacing his hands behind his back. Severus isn’t certain, but he suspects Draco is feeling responsible for Goyle’s actions. That will require a discussion between them later, though Severus doesn’t yet know what to say.

“How?” Severus asks.

“Willingly learning whatever educational material is supplied to them in their exile,” Granger supplies. “Or at least making an honest go of it. Apologizing to those they’ve wronged and meaning it, not to just saying the words and hoping it’ll fix the problem.”

“Demonstrating that while they are capable of making mistakes, they can also choose to be better than they were,” Nizar murmurs. “Yes, I can see us writing exactly such into the original charta.”

Severus can see it, as well. Kind, vicious lunatics. “Who would be supervising him?”

“The elves would help, but the moment the ghosts overheard us talking about it, they wanted to get involved.” Kartik smiles. “Binns was especially interested, but I think it would be cruel and unusual punishment if it was only Binns doing the job. The Grey Lady, Nicholas, the Baron, and Jonathan the Friar all want to be involved. So does Peeves, but he only gets a turn at it if he’s in the Baron’s company—and that was their decision, not ours.”

“I see.” Severus resolves to read the entirety of the school’s charter at a later date. If that is an option within the rules, he desperately wants to find out what other gems are lurking in those pages. “I assume that without an attempt at improved behavior, the punishment lasts until end of term?”

“Usually, it’s the end of the established conflict that made them an enemy combatant in the first
place,” Granger clarifies. “End of term doesn’t apply if the war is still ongoing and they remain underage.”

“And our year isn’t due to graduate until June of 1998, sir,” Boot says. “Though I really doubt that the war will last that long, not with nine war mages wandering about Britain.”

“Have you mentioned this to anyone else yet?” Nizar asks.

They all shake their heads. “No. Given how things went down…” Weasley makes a face. “We thought Professor Snape should have first say on what to do about Goyle, sir, given that it was him the idiot almost killed. Being stuck to the wall isn’t much compared to that.”

“Agreed,” Draco says. “I just wish Greg hadn’t been so stupid about this.”

“We all do.” Severus gives the students of his House a look of further approval. “Gregory Goyle is one of ours. Like others within this school who might bear certain hidden marks, he has betrayed the ideals of the House of Slytherin. I will share your opinion with the other Heads of House when I meet with them later this morning. If the four of us agree, then in-school banishment is exactly what will be done. It won’t save him if his parents retrieve Goyle from Hogwarts,” Severus adds.

“I highly doubt that will ever occur to them,” Draco says in a tight voice.

“And this’ll keep his stupid arse alive long enough to maybe consider changing his mind,” Astoria mutters under her breath.

Severus pretends he didn’t hear that statement. “Thank you for your assistance. Now see to your duties as Prefects,” he orders.

“On it, sir!” Bhatia chirps.

“And go back to your dormitories!” Severus adds, meaning the twins and Miss Greengrass. They look cheerful enough about it that he thinks they’ll actually comply.

“We’re glad you’re all right, sir,” Miss Parkinson says as the group departs. The others voice agreement, even Ron blasted Weasley, which is still so odd that Severus keeps expecting that sudden bit of ginger cooperation to be a trap.

“I’m worried about Miss Edgecombe.”

Severus glances at Nizar, who is watching the students depart with a pensive expression. “Why? Unlike the others, she didn’t speak at all, maintaining her desire to appear neutral.”

“Just agreeing to be here with the other Prefects might place her in danger among the Baby Death Eaters and Marked idiots. She didn’t have to do this.” Nizar crosses his arms. “I don’t think she’ll ever say aloud that she’s anti-Voldemort, not if the Death Eater in her family is as close as I suspect, but her presence just now was a quiet statement of support in your favor. There are Marked idiots with enough political savvy to connect those dots.”

“Maybe so, but if they harm Miss Edgecombe, those same Marked idiots would then have to contend with Miss Edgecombe’s close family member. I doubt they would delight in the experience.”

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Nizar remains close at Severus’s side for the entire walk to the Potions classroom. The stairs make the bottom of his feet tingle, but not in any way that feels detrimental enough to go bleating back to Poppy. Severus has needed to regenerate damaged nerves often over the years from Cruciatus torture. He knows what the danger signs are. He also knows how much worse it can be if he ignores Poppy’s appropriately dire warning.

There is a green-and-gold glittering black basilisk with emerald green eyes waiting in a coil in front of Severus’s closed classroom door. “Why?” he asks in dismay.

“Kanza wished to help.” Nizar reaches down to the floor so that Kanza can glide onto his fingers. She climbs up his robe sleeve in a jewel-like coil until she nudges her way beneath Nizar’s shirt, searching out the warm of his neck. “I told her that the best assistance right now would be to act as a deterrent for anyone trying to enter this classroom. They would either be fool enough to topple right down into the pit, or their intent would be to cause yet more trouble. I’ve had quite enough of that for the week.”

“She’d be chilled to spend that much time down here.”

Nizar smiles at him. Beneath his shirt, Kanza hisses a response. “She appreciates you thinking of her well-being, but Salazar placed a good Warming Charm on the stone. She was fine. Also, spiders and mice. The weather is starting to warm up a bit, and thus, so is her bloody appetite.” He pushes open the door and goes inside. “Please be cautious, Severus. There aren’t many steps to be had.”

Severus keeps his eyes on the floor, noting that there is about two feet of useful space, before the floor drops away to nothing. Once he has placed his feet, he looks up and then stares around at the ruins of the room. “I truly thought nothing could be worse than the damage wrought by those dueling, idiotic second-years at the end of January.” At least they’d had only foolishness in mind, not deliberate harm.

The shelves on the walls that Severus carefully maintains with glass vessels full of Preserved potions ingredients are almost all destroyed, their contents smashed to bits from having students flung at them. Everything that rested on the floor itself is also gone, fallen into the chamber below the classroom.

“Oh, there is always the potential for worse.” Nizar leans against the wall rather than investigate the room. “This is with the edge of flooring added around the walls, Severus. Before Salazar called forth this bit of stone, there was nothing.”

“Longbottom,” Severus murmurs, but not in anger. This was most assuredly not that young man’s fault, especially when it was Severus who gave Longbottom permission to begin experimenting—carefully—with plant-based potions in a classroom setting once more. Things had been going well, with the lack of incidents acting as another boost to Longbottom’s frail confidence. Then Goyle decided to be a complete imbecile.

Severus considers his footing and then takes another step forward so that he can peer into the gaping ruin. The chamber is deeper than he initially recalled, and looks like the aftermath of a bomb blast.

He feels a brief moment of remembered panic, and reminds himself that is not trapped, dead, or dying. No one else was harmed, either, merely inconvenienced. It’s easy to let that panic go, to then consider all that could have been. “This could have been fatal.”

“Don’t. Don’t say that. Just—please. Do not.”
Severus turns around to find that Nizar has gone an alarming shade of ashen grey. He backs away from the edge. “I apologize,” Severus says, choosing his words with care, “but I’m not dead, and aside from this mess, everything is fine.”

“It nearly wasn’t,” Nizar whispers.

Severus knows he is missing something, but it is not from today, or from late last night. He uses Legilimency to recall what Nizar said to him on Friday while Severus waited to be removed from the bottom of the chamber. “Minerva knew because of her watch. You didn’t.”

Nizar shakes his head. “No. I did not.”

“Protectoris.” Recognition slips in and tries to slap Severus in the face. “You should have known, but you didn’t.” Nizar nods. “Does that mean your link to the castle is damaged?”

Another nod. This is possibly the least talkative Nizar has ever been, but Severus is capable of filling the silence. “Do you think the damage is because of Obliviscaris omnia, or from long-term storage inside a portrait?”

“Long-term storage.” Nizar makes a startled sound, smiling as some of his color returns to normal. “No, it’s more than likely the former. If that spell can damage memory, then why not also damage magical connections that might rely on those memories being intact? It would explain why I’d lost so much of my awareness of Britain’s population until Her Majesty reaffirmed my title as war mage of Britain.”

Severus reaches out to take Nizar’s hand. Nizar’s fingers are cold, which is as much a signal as to how disturbed he is as his terse answers. “There has to be a solution.”

“Two of them,” Nizar admits. “Either I pass on the title to someone else, or I…fix it.”

“You don’t want to pass on the title.” Severus knows that to his core. Nizar would rather drink lava than pass on the title before it’s right to do so.

“No. Not with Voldemort still alive. After that, I might not mind so much, but no—not right now.”

Patience. Severus has dealt with Lucius Malfoy at his most obnoxious; he can be patient in the face of whatever difficulty Nizar is dancing around. “How would this damage be repaired?”

“If Myrddin were still alive, I’d make him do it,” Nizar says at once, but it’s a brief rally. What takes its place is…fright.

Severus grimaces. Nizar fears so little that he cannot even begin to fathom what might be so fearful about this process. “No matter how you feel about the method of repair, we don’t have time for this to remain a lingering problem. I know how you feel about your vows, and about the safety of this school. Voldemort might not do anything today, but tomorrow might well already be on his fucking schedule. What must be done?”

Nizar stares at the opposite wall, where a few shelves are still hanging in near-vertical, pathetic wooden scraps. “What I say to you goes no further. You speak of this to no one. Not to the portraits. Not even to Salazar.”

“Dear God, does it requiring murdering someone?” Severus isn’t entirely bothered by the idea. It isn’t as if they lack Death Eaters to choose from.

Nizar gives him a blank look. “What? No, it doesn’t. No murder required.” He draws in a sudden
breath and does his best to shake off whatever fear is attempting to consume him. “Just as the four Founders are connected to the Founding Stone of Hogewáþ, so too is her Protector.”

Severus frowns. “Why the fuck is that such a secret?”

“Myrddin had his reasons, though he hoped that those reasons would never come to light. He would not even tell me,” Nizar says, regarding the far wall again as he thinks on his words. “One of the only truths he offered was that he thought the Founders would be disturbed by the whole of that magical potential. In that regard he was right, but he was also wrong. Myrddin understood Helga, Rowena, Godric, and Salazar as much as he didn’t understand them at all. If the Protectoris connection is true, then I have as much strength as they to shape and change this castle. The four of them knew I would do no such thing—I didn’t even use that strength when it came to constructing my classroom. Hogewáþ could have assisted me, but I did the whole of that myself.”

Nizar tilts his head. “I just recalled that. That’s nice.”

“The Stone, Nizar,” Severus prompts when Nizar remains quiet.

“The conflict Myrddin feared was that if the Protector and the Four who held the castle’s magic ever disagreed, it could be…” Nizar makes a face. “Much like the war mage title, if this castle comes under attack, I’m in charge. It’s automatic. Hogwarts listens to her Protector first and to the Keepers second. Myrddin liked power enough that he thought the Founders would be displeased by that.”

“You told them. I know you did, because Salazar deferred to you regarding Dumbledore,” Severus says.

Nizar nods. “Godric was just sarding relieved that if we were attacked, it didn’t need to be him making those decisions—and by then he trusted me to know to make the correct ones, anyway.”

“What else did Myrddin say?”

“If Trelawney has a glimpse of the future that isn’t a prophecy, she tells everyone. Myrddin was the sort of Seer who would rather take those insights to his bloody grave.” Nizar sighs. “He told me never to give up the role of Protectoris, not unless I was literally dying, and if that was the case? I’d better have lined up a successor who the magic would automatically tie itself to, because I was certainly going to have other things on my mind. Without that warning, I would have passed on the title before the portrait. Given that none of the Heads of House were tied to Hogwarts properly, I doubt there would have been a Protector, either. Without such, there would have been on one in this school who would have been able to restore that title in Hallowe’en of 1995. Not to me, nor to anyone else. Salazar would have needed to convince all four of you to be tied into the magic, and then convince you all that the Protectoris link should be restored.”

Severus frowns. He suspects the lack of Protector would have been a bad idea for a multitude of reasons, but doesn’t know why it bothers him beyond instinctive awareness. “That can’t have been the only reason for your connection to this Founding Stone to be such a secret.”

“No, Myrddin claimed that when there ever came a time when the Founders would need to know of my shared connection to the Founding Stone, I would also then understand why it was a secret kept from all of us. I have no idea what the sarding shit he was speaking of, but as one of the Four is most certainly still alive, it will remain a secret.”

Severus tugs on Nizar’s hand. “Sarding again? Your centuries are showing.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Do you recall what you told me about non-magical sources of
electricity, such as what powered the lights and devices in London?”

“That it was dangerous, and you should never shove your finger into an unprotected light socket?”

“Right. That.” Nizar’s expression is somewhere between displeased and distressed. “Touching the Founding Stone is the equivalent of shoving your entire limb into a giant electrical socket.”

“Strong magic.” Severus hisses out a curse. Now he understands why Nizar isn’t looking forward to doing so. “Flashbacks, or recollection.”

“Possibly.”

“Would anything worse happen?” Severus asks. The flashbacks are bad enough to contemplate. The portraits told him that Nizar’s recollections of Helga and Rowena were intense. He would rather this sort of magical exposure not cause an actual brainstorm.

Nizar frowns for a moment. “I’ll probably ask you to yank me away from the Founding Stone if I’m touching it for longer than a few seconds. The last time I spoke to that Stone, I had Myrddin to assist in the process. This time it’s just me, and I’m not an elemental magician. I just understand the flow of magic. Useful, but not necessarily something that would prevent me from getting lost in the sheer amount of concentrated magical energy contained in the Stone.”

“Then I would be glad to assist, if only to keep you from being eaten by a magical node.” Severus is relieved when Nizar smiles. “I have to ask: if this Founding Stone can be used to repair the Protectoris connection, what about the memories lost by the Gaunt’s spell?”

“I would be busy concentrating on repairing my connection to Hogewáp’s magic, not trying to attempt any sort of memory repair,” Nizar answers him, and then sighs. “I’m not certain there is that much left to recall, Severus.”

“Does that bother you?”

Nizar’s response warms Severus’s blackened heart “Not as much, not anymore. The only memories I fear to lose are those I have of you.”

"I shut my eyes and turn’d them on my heart.
As a man calls for wine before he fights,
I ask’d one draught of earlier, happier sights,
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.
Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier’s art:
One taste of the old time sets all to rights."

-Richard Browning, *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*

At ten o’clock sharp, Severus meets with the other Heads of House in Dumbledore’s office. His feet were still tingling as he climbed the stairs out of the dungeons, but things are improving at such a steady rate that the sensation is almost pleasant.

Dumbledore has no say in the decision of the Heads of House, per the Charter they were all reintroduced to by Salazar in February, but he still insisted the meeting take place in his office. Severus reflects that Dumbledore often can’t resist sticking his nose into every available crevice. It’s an irritating habit, but they have no reason to exclude Dumbledore from this meeting. Nizar thinks inclusion is the better idea, so Dumbledore doesn’t feel as if they’re all conspiring against him—which is amusing, as they are often doing exactly that.

Nizar and Salazar are also present. They’re lingering in the back of the office, near the doors, making it clear that they don’t consider themselves to be a part of this process. Severus knows they’re present to make certain Dumbledore doesn’t attempt to interfere, either by Legilimency—Ponoma needs lessons in Occlumency *immediately*—or by attempting something foolish with the Elder Wand.

Before Severus can sit down, Minerva hugs him. Severus endures it with a muted growl. “I am *not* dead!”

“Yes, but for a terrible moment, I feared you might be!” Minerva retorts. She steps back, straightening her robes and hat, before treating him to a stern glare. “Never again, Severus!”

“Never again will my floor melt out from beneath my feet?” Severus rolls his eyes. “I shall truly endeavor to avoid it.”

Seriously, though; he never wants to experience that again. Once was quite enough.

Filius restrains his enthusiasm for Severus’s presence to a brief handclasp, though his grip is stronger
than usual. Pomona smiles and expresses her pleasure that Severus is not, in fact, deceased—or worse, paralyzed. As if he needed the reminder.

“It is indeed a pleasure to see you recovered without any difficulty.” Dumbledore doesn’t act as if he expects a response, well aware of the fact that Severus isn’t in the habit of providing blatantly obvious answers. Instead, Dumbledore only waits for Severus to sit down in the last of four chairs placed in a semi-circle before his desk. “I suppose we should get started, then. I’m aware that there have been discussions of expulsion, but it does have to be a consensus, does it not?”

When the others glance at him, Severus nods, both to answer Dumbledore’s question and to signal his approval of the in-school banishment. “It does. However, the school charter has provided us with a solution that does not require Mister Goyle’s expulsion from the castle. It would keep him away from his foolish family, almost all of them Death Eaters, and thus safe from what would no doubt be a swift and idiotic death.”

Filius nods. “Indeed.” He continues the explanation when Severus falls silent, reciting the charter’s rules regarding underage students who act as enemy combatants, and how the situation is to be handled until the student is of legal age. “I much prefer this option to expulsion. It’s certainly a better option than the Ministry’s holding cells.”

“I’m not fond of the idea, given how isolated the boy might feel, but it’s far preferable than Mister Goyle running off to join the Death Eaters,” Pomona says. “And the punishment ends at the end of the war or the original expected date of his graduation. After that, if he chooses to leave Hogwarts and be foolish…well, at least we attempted to prevent it.”

“Our only concern is if his parents try to lay claim to him.” Minerva’s eyes are shining with the particular gleaming sharpness they gain when she is considering student safety. “We might be certain that his parents are Death Eaters, but that is *not* public knowledge, nor something we could prove without violating certain Pure-blood crafted laws. If the Goyles send for him and the Wizengamot sides with his family, we would have no choice but to hand Mister Goyle over to their dubious care.”

Dumbledore nods. “That is true. Mister Goyle’s parents still have first legal claim to him, no matter what we decide.”

*Us, not you*, Severus thinks, glaring at Dumbledore and wondering if he can spontaneously develop the ability to reduce someone to bits of dust. Dumbledore would fight tooth and nail for a student’s right to remain within Hogwarts if it had been a Gryffindor who melted Severus’s damned classroom floor. He has witnessed that bias for himself.

Fortunately, a family claim is not one they will have to worry about. “Vincent and Illustrious Goyle have another son, Corinthian, named after his grand-uncle, who is still too young for any sort of school,” Severus says, his voice laced with acid. “They have never once voiced concern about the possibility of losing their family’s eldest heir, and spoke far more often of Corinthian. It would not surprise me to discover that they encouraged Mister Goyle to act against the school in hopes that it would, one way or another, cause his death, which would allow their preferred child of Corinthian to become the family heir.”

“Bigger me,” Pomona breathes. “Do you really think they would be so callous?”

Severus glances in her direction. “Pomona: they’re fucking *Death Eaters.*”

Pomona winces and nods. “Yes, that is a very good point.”

“Then the four Heads of House are in agreement as to this in-school banishment?” Dumbledore
waits for everyone to nod before he lets out a heavy sigh, as if they have all just proven to be the gravest of disappointments. “I’m glad he will be safeguarded then, if in an unorthodox manner. Then it becomes a matter of choosing where Mister Goyle will live once he has been removed from the Slytherin dormitories.”

“We should reopen the Dark Tower,” Salazar says. Severus is not the only one to turn around and regard the Slytherin brothers in surprise.

“You all look like we’ve just suggested eating Goyle,” Nizar observes in obvious amusement. “What is your problem with the tower?”

“It’s a bloody prison, is what!” Pomona responds tartly. “I thought we were banishing the child, not jailing him!”

“Oh, for gods’ sake,” Salazar mutters, resting his hand over his eyes. “Another history lesson, then, and one that’s long overdue, it seems. Yes, there are cells in the upper floors of the Dark Tower, but we fought battles to protect this castle from those who would have invaded and destroyed the school. We had to put captured prisoners somewhere until we discovered who they belonged to, and thus could send them back where they came from.”

“The Deorc Tower, the Dark Tower, is a nickname—more so, its name was a joke,” Nizar emphasizes. “It was called such because its placement in the castle seemed of most allure to those who practiced what were considered darker magics. Yes, that distinction existed to a point, we just didn’t give a fuck.” Nizar looks annoyed by the faces the others must be making in response. “My son Elfric lived in the Dark Tower. Do go ahead and tell me that it is thus a place of evil. I haven’t dueled with anyone in a week, and I’m feeling rather irritable about it.”

“The living quarters in the tower would need to be cleaned, but I’m certain the elves would be willing to assist,” Salazar adds. “Besides, given the tower’s current reputation among the students, it would certainly help to keep trespassers away from Mister Goyle except for those who request to visit with him.”

Nizar smirks at his brother. “I do find it hilarious that the students avoid the Dark Tower because it is said to be haunted, yet we already have a school full of actual ghosts.”

“I would like to see these living quarters, but otherwise… it does seem to be an excellent solution,” Dumbledore admits. “Heads of House?”

Pomona spreads her hands and sighs. “Merlin, why not?”

“I’m fine with it,” Filius says.

“As am I,” Minerva adds. “There are certainly worse choices.” She reaches into her robe pocket and holds out a wand to Severus. “As to the last part: we decided it best that this go to you, Severus. Given the decision that has just been made, it is properly yours to break.”

Severus studies Gregory Goyle’s wand, turning it around in his hands. Beneath the varnish, it is made of English oak, but has a poplar handle. He recalls Goyle mentioning it had a core of dragon heartstring—unimaginative choice, given the combination of woods and what they’re meant to be capable of. Poplar is a consistent wood for casting powerful spells, and English oak wands tend to be held by those of courage. Hair from a manticore’s mane would have suited better.

Goyle has never demonstrated any of the wand’s qualities, but this is a wand from Ollivander’s. Severus might deride the man for limiting his wand cores to so few choices, but he is otherwise a
skilled wandmaker. If Ollivander paired this wand to Goyle, it’s most certainly meant to match the wizard Goyle was capable of becoming.

Severus tucks the wand into his robe. “When you are fifteen years old, two years is a very long time. He has time to change his ways.”

“Are you certain?” Pomona asks.

Severus stares at her. “If there is still a war on when that young man turns seventeen and he wishes to side with the enemy, I will snap Mister Goyle’s wand myself before removing him from this castle. Not a moment before. Is that clear?”

“That is exactly as it should be,” Dumbledore interrupts, though Severus isn’t certain if Pomona would have continued the argument. Possibly not; she did allow Nizar to tie her into the castle’s magic. That means she is on her way to escaping the anti-Slytherin prejudice she somehow managed to develop despite not even bloody schooling here. “Salazar, if you could ask the elves to prepare a room in the Dark Tower for Mister Goyle, I would be grateful.”

“Of course,” Salazar says, though his eyes flicker over to Severus before he smiles at Dumbledore. “I can do so now.”

“And if there is nothing else to be done, I am leaving,” Severus announces as he stands up. “I have a great deal of potions supplies to reacquire, and very little time in which to do so.”

Salazar Disapparates from the room, ostensibly to visit the elves as requested. Severus still has no idea what that specific look was for, but will doubtless know soon enough. He is tempted to also Apparate, but isn’t in the mood to sabotage his own recovery. He settles for using the revolving staircase to descend the Headmaster’s Tower.

Minerva catches up to him at Galfridus’s statute, and Nizar Apparates into place at Severus’s side a moment later—which certainly gave him time to visit Salazar and the elves before rejoining them.

The three of them walk down the corridor together. Severus still finds himself trying to adjust to the fact that he’s not making this journey alone anymore.

No, that’s wrong. He is still adjusting to the discovery that he prefers it this way. That’s what is odd.

“Albus did not once insist that we keep that young man in Hogwarts,” Minerva says under her breath. “Not once during the entire time it was being discussed while you were recovering, Severus. He did not actively call for Mister Goyle’s expulsion, but he didn’t speak against it, either.”

“Dumbledore told me in confidence that he wanted to send the right sort of message to discourage other students from repeating Greg’s poor example.” Nizar sounds as though he’s been seething for the last few minutes. “The only reason he didn’t speak against the decision the Heads of House just made is because the in-school banishment still sends that sort of message. It’s just not the result he wanted. Dumbledore was also allowing sentiment for the wounded to inform his decision, and one cannot do that when it comes to our students!”

Severus glances at him in surprise. “Dumbledore wanted Goyle expelled on my behalf?”

“In part,” Nizar says. “Dumbledore doesn’t dislike you, Severus. Quite the opposite, really. Most of his motivations, however, were based in politics.”

“Albus would be hard-pressed to find any teacher willing to work here if word got out that students were offing the staff,” Minerva says dryly. “Quirrell is exempted from that, of course.” She gives a
cool nod to the sixth-year Hufflepuff Prefects as they walk by, politely defiant and unrepentant. If they’re looking for further gossip, they’re seeking it too soon.

Nizar runs his hand along the stone wall before they emerge into the wider space before the secondary staircase, which gives one access to Hogwarts from the ground floor all the way to the seventh storey. “Minerva is correct. Dumbledore would have preferred to send the stronger message of expulsion for a student that tried to assassinate one of his war mages, and isn’t happy that the Heads of House chose to keep Goyle under safe watch. He tried to put on a good show of desiring otherwise, but in this, his intent was clear.”

“And it often is not,” Severus murmurs. Their lives would be so much simpler if Dumbledore would choose a role to play and stick with it. It would be far preferable to these annoying guessing games as Dumbledore tries to manipulate events on multiple fronts.

“Your age is showing, Nizar,” Minerva comments in amusement. “It has been for the whole of the morning.”

“I blame stress,” Nizar replies. “I’m avoiding the lunch hour, but I’ll see you at dinner. We’re still on for repairing Severus’s classroom afterwards?”

“If Severus is ready, yes,” Minerva agrees, looking to Severus.

“I already know exactly what was lost, so it isn’t as if I need it repaired sooner for sorting through the remains,” Severus says. “After dinner is fine.” It also grants him further time for recovery; by dinner, his grip on his wand should be firm rather than uncertain. He hesitates, and then says, “Thank you.”

Minerva smiles. “Of course, Severus. You would grant me the same courtesy.”

His eye twitches, but he doesn’t deny it. It’s true.

Minerva leaves them to go to her office, where she will then Floo to the church where the services for the Finch-Fletchley family is being held. Doubtless Pomona is doing the same, as are Filius and Dumbledore. “Madam Tyler will be there on our behalf, will she not?”

Nizar glances at him and nods. “She will. I know I don’t have the patience to sit through the service, but I’ll be putting in an appearance at the gravesites for that part of the affair. You are staying put,” he adds.

Severus doesn’t argue. “I’m not yet up for that sort of traveling.” He looks up the stairs. “Or stair-climbing.”

“I doubt someone doing the work of Apparition would harm you.” Nizar takes his hand and Apparates them to the seventh storey corridor that houses the ridiculous tapestry of dancing trolls.

Despite the propped-open door, Nizar’s classroom is empty of any waiting students hoping for his attention. They go into Nizar’s quarters, where Severus is promptly wrapped by a shorter Slytherin attempting to impersonate the giant squid in the Black Lake.

“Nizar. I’m still fine. I’ve been injured in far worse ways.”

“No, you’ve mostly been in far worse pain, idiot.” Nizar’s retort is muffled by the fact that he refuses to lift his face from Severus’s shoulder. “The only things more dangerous than what happened Friday afternoon? Werewolf in a tunnel, spying on that fucking walking corpse while dealing with Cruciatu torture, Voldemort’s attempt to kill you with the Dark Mark, and active combat. Please allow me to be bloody terrified now that it’s all over and dealt with.”
When put that way, Severus can understand why Nizar is upset. He’s not certain he would handle the situation very well if their positions had been reversed.

Severus convinces Nizar to sit on the sofa with him in the spot closest to the fire. Kanza slithers out from beneath the collar of Nizar’s shirt to curl around Nizar’s wrist, placing herself nearer to the hearth without abandoning him entirely.

He’s idly contemplating the flames when he realizes that Nizar has gone boneless against him. He glances down to find that Nizar is asleep, brow still furrowed by worry.

It wouldn’t surprise Severus in the slightest to discover that Nizar hasn’t slept since the incident in the Potions classroom, which is concerning and frustrating. Salazar is in a similar state, Minerva reports that he sleeps about as much as his brother.

Severus has watched throughout March as two stubborn men wear themselves down to the bone. If Salazar and Nizar are not teaching, tutoring, making themselves available—making themselves an undeniable presence—then they’re working on what is needed to repair Wizarding Britain’s education system. Salazar wants there to be a new system completed and ready to implement for next term, still certain he won’t be there to oversee the work after Voldemort’s defeat.

Knowing that their time is limited, that summer may still bring about Voldemort’s defeat—if not his death—has not helped Severus’s peace of mind. He spends evenings and late nights with Trelawney’s latest prophecy repeating in his head like a turntable with its needle skipping over the same hated track. To lose Salazar will be hard enough; he has become extremely fond of his House Founder in recent weeks. To lose them both is unfathomable.

Severus glances down when he feels pressure on his sleeve. Kanza has unwound herself from Nizar’s wrist and is perched on Severus’s arm. “Yes?”

Kanza blinks her multifaceted emerald eyes, tongue darting out once, before she crawls up his arm. She wraps herself around Severus’s neck, tickling his skin as she settles herself comfortably into place.

“I’m still not dead.” He has no idea what Kanza hisses in reply, but even to his ears, she sounds amused. “Thank you for the distraction from unwanted thoughts.” That time, her only response is to briefly tighten around his throat before relaxing into a contented coil of basilisk jewelry.

The difficulty in repairing Hogwarts’ education bothers him, even if Severus is not the one charged with fixing it. Nizar and Salazar are addressing ignorance that has never been corrected on multiple fronts, while also teaching classes whose curriculums they have been expanded to cover far more than the indicated subject—and they’re doing it practically alone. The nature of Severus’s role as Head of House means that he has little spare time, and he’s certain that Salazar and Nizar would turn down the four Heads of House if they were to offer their assistance. Salazar has already stated that it is completed plots and plans they wish to put before the Heads of House for their approval, not scattered thoughts and endless lists.

It is immensely frustrating to watch other members of staff fucking argue with Nizar or Salazar, wanting to know why the Slytherins are attempting to fix a system that isn’t broken. When some fool asks that question, Severus often gets to witness the fallout of Nizar verbally tearing them a new one with fierce, vicious politeness. The asker usually flees with their tail between their legs. That Eustas hasn’t learned his lesson in that regard has not yet stopped being entertaining.

Severus has never questioned the necessity of altering Hogwarts’ curriculum. He’s been aware of those gaps since age eleven, taught of them by his mother’s disgust in Hogwarts’ reduced class
Severus was never content with stupidity, especially if the failing was his own, and educated himself beyond the limits of Hogwarts’ subjects. Most of that learning is based in magic, as he avoided a great deal of the non-magical world, but there are non-magical books in his collection regarding modern scientific studies of plants and their possible medicinal traits, which translates directly to their use in potions.

Some students are content to remain ignorant, while others never have the opportunity or means to discover how much their education lacks in the first place. Severus much prefers the idea of what the Slytherin brothers are doing, which would make Hogwarts a leader in magical education for the entirety of Europe. At the very least, it might also mean fewer preventable explosions in his bloody classroom.

Nizar wakes up less than an hour later with a sudden jerk before he sits up. “Sorry.” He scrubs at his eyes with one hand. “Unplanned napping.”

“I didn’t mind,” Severus replies. He was content to remain in place while Nizar succumbed to exhaustion, as those moments have been rare of late. The crackle of fire and flame, combined with the sound of another’s breathing, has become familiar and soothing. “But you awoke like something was bothering you.”

“Oh, questioning me when I’ve not yet had tea. That is so very Slytherin.” Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose. “Before I fell asleep, I was dwelling on whether or not the Founding Stone was the best option for repairing that magical connection—if it might not be wiser just to find a successor.”

Severus tries not to let on how disturbed he feels. Even more than before, Nizar giving up the school’s title of Protector seems wrong. “Would a successor not need training?”

“Well, I certainly did not receive any sarding training,” Nizar grouses.

Severus raises an eyebrow and leans back so he can look Nizar in the face. “Your vocal patterns just shifted three times with nine words.”

Nizar considers what was said and grumbles under his breath. “Oh, that’s auspicious. You’re right, though. It isn’t a realistic thing to expect of anyone, taking on this job without the time to adjust to what it means. That fucking walking corpse certainly wouldn’t be in the mood to grant such time.”

“Myrddin expected it of you, didn’t he?” It isn’t a question; Severus is certain.

“Actually, he gave me more preparation for the title of Protectoris than he gave me warning or instruction for becoming Britain’s only fucking war mage,” Nizar replies wryly. “He was such a complete dick. I almost wish he were alive again just to see the two of you face off over a cauldron.”

Severus smirks at him. “Who would win?”

“For sheer, vicious verbal might? Oh, most certainly you. Brewing, however…” Nizar shrugs. “Myrddin was a tricky, sly bastard. He’d swear he had passed on all he ever learned and then the next day would show you something new, claiming it had only just occurred to him. Salazar wanted to kill Myrddin in his sleep more than once during his apprenticeship, let alone during Myrddin’s later visits to Hogewáþ.” Then he abruptly switches topics. “It’s a moot point, anyway. There is no one else who could take on the role of Protectoris. Not right now, anyway. Anyone with the
potential is either already serving Hogwarts in other roles, or they aren’t capable of it due to their magic, their politics, or unwanted bias.”

It’s an immediate relief to hear those words, but Severus still doesn’t know why he feels so strongly about it. Maybe it’s an aspect of being tied into Hogwarts’ magic. Severus noticed as a child that the castle had decided opinions about things, and she might well be rejecting the idea of her current Protector giving up his post. “Then stop worrying about it. We’ll go see this Founding Stone tonight, if you’d like, though I’d prefer it be after my classroom has a floor once more.”

“After everyone is meant to be abed, then,” Nizar says. “It will give me opportunity to figure out how to drug Salazar into senselessness for the evening.”

Severus stares at him. “I really shouldn’t be surprised any longer by anything you say, ever, and yet you’ve managed it again.”

“He’s a bloody Earth-Speaker!” Nizar exclaims. “He’d fucking know it the moment I touched that damned benighted Stone!”

“So your solution is to drug him?”

Nizar gives him an odd look. “What? It isn’t as if it would be the first time. Or vice versa. Tell me you’re not tempted by the idea of attempting to brew a harmless sleeping draught that a Potions Master cannot sense or taste before they’ve drunk half of it and it’s already too late.”

Severus slumps back against the sofa. “I can do no such thing. I did that to Slughorn in sixth year.”

“You never mentioned that!” Nizar seems torn between insult and laughter.

“I’m not certain it counts. I don’t think an elf would label that man a true Potions Master, anyway,” Severus replies, and Nizar leans forward, laughing until he’s gasping for breath. “You’re welcome,” he says smugly.

Nizar wipes at his face, teary-eyed and flushed. “Yes, thank you. I needed that.”

“If you’re this anxious regarding the Stone, compensate in other ways,” Severus suggests. He is thinking of a Calming Draught, or perhaps the blatant strength in the Draught of Peace.

“Compensate.” Nizar sits up again and smiles. “I have no idea why that brought the idea to mind, but aside from eating lunch, the only other thing I want to do at the moment is snog you senseless.”

Severus would very much like to accept that option, but a quick glance at the silent clock on Nizar’s wall convinces him otherwise. “Hold that thought—Nizar. Not. Literally.”

Nizar gives him an innocent look. “You said to.”

“I’m aware, and one would think by now that I would know better than to leave you those sorts of opportunities. There are elves who are going to turn up with a meal in these quarters at literally any moment. I also need to be available in my office for part of this day, even if the only thing I do of note is to pass gossip along to certain Slytherins.”

“These are the moments when I truly do look forward to summer break. I should be doing the same.” Then Nizar leans forward and kisses him. Severus smiles against Nizar’s mouth and tangles his fingers into Nizar’s hair, deepening the kiss for a brief moment.

Nizar glares at him when they break apart. “That is still the worst sort of encouragement in regards to
me doing my job.”

There is a near-silent pop that means an elf’s presence. Severus glances over to see Filky gazing at them with both of her ears raised high. “Should Filky be returning with lunch later, Professors?”

“No. No, it’s fine.” Nizar smiles at the elf in reassurance, but Filky is decidedly unconvinced. She places the tray for two onto Nizar’s table, gives them another suspicious look, and departs.

“Have I gone mad?” Nizar asks Severus. It’s a rather abrupt question, but Severus thinks he understands the point of it.

“I’m afraid so.” Severus hesitates, wondering if Nizar intended those words as a quote or a genuine question. Then he decides it doesn’t really matter. “You’re entirely bonkers. But I’ll tell you a secret: all the best people are.”

Nizar stares at him blankly before he breaks down into laughter again. Severus considers that result to be well worth the quoting of that blasted book.

* * * * *

After lunch (and after returning Kanza to Nizar) Severus straightens his robes, considers how he is feeling, and then Apparates directly to his locked and warded office. He takes down the wards and opens the door—just in time for a group of Slytherin students to land at his feet.

Severus raises an eyebrow at the ungainly pile of students and robes. “When one is choosing to lie in wait, it is often best not to advertise it by being so obvious. It’s also wiser not to do so in such a large group.”

“We were hiding from Mrs. Norris!” Miss Bhatia explains from somewhere within the tangle of Prefects and assorted Slytherins. “She’d ignore some of us in the corridor, but not all of us, sir!”

Severus bites back an amused sound and steps away, leaving Miss Bhatia, Malfoy, Zabini, both Greengrass sisters, Miss Parkinson, Warrington, Miss Greenwood, Gupta, Miss Parangyo, Higgs, and tiny Miss Dolohov to pick themselves up, dust each other off, and pretend to have some semblance of dignity. “Next time, please allow a limited number of your Prefects to represent your House instead of trying to crowd into a small doorway that was never meant to hold that many warm bodies at one time, especially during a time when most of you are meant to be restricted to your dormitories.”

“We’d like to,” Higgs says as he helps Miss Parkinson to her feet, “but there are some people in our House who only listen to whoever they’ve decided to trust for the week. They’ll hear the news that you’re not dead from someone like Warrington, but they’ll refuse to hear it from us Prefects.”

“Which has already been done,” Warrington adds, “but I’m not sure how much more of listening to their self-important idiocy I can take before I run screaming from this castle.”

Severus pauses before sitting down at his desk. “Are the in-House divisions becoming that terrible?”

“Not really, sir.” Daphne Greengrass gets out her wand to repair a tear in her robe. “It’s the usual sort of politics we’ve been dealing with since You-Know-Who decided to be an active threat again. They’re just aware of the fact that the Prefects have chosen not to join with the threat, so they won’t
acknowledge most of them at all. They sort of swing back and forth on whether or not they’ll accept
the company of Blaise, Draco, Adele, and myself, since we now have the potential of being
powerful allies.”

Gupta grins. “Which is where Bulstrode and Warrington come in, since they’re large and terrifying,
and everyone just knows that they’ll ultimately be siding with You-Know-Who, since their entire
families have done exactly that.”

“Twits,” Miss Parkinson pronounces.

“They relay the gossip to the idiots on the Prefects’ behalf. It’s not anyone’s fault but theirs if they
still refuse to listen, sir,” Higgs adds.

“Miss Bulstrode was sensible enough to realize that she would have made lurking in my doorway
impossible, at least,” Severus murmurs. “If you’re here, that means the idiots of our House want
information.”

“They do. Some of them still respect you, sir, even if they’ll go to their graves at this point refusing to
admit it,” Daphne says. “The others are terrified of you because you’re a war mage. So sad for
them.”

“They’re terrified of me, too.” Miss Greenwood adds, looking pleased. “It really makes me
understand why you go to the trouble of being formidable at all times, sir.”

“Indeed,” Severus acknowledges. “You’re all wishing to know of Mister Goyle’s fate?”

Malfoy is the first to nod. “He was my friend, sir. I don’t know if he ever will be again, but I’d like to
know what’s going to happen to him.”

“We did notice Goyle hasn’t been expelled from the fifth-year dormitory,” Zabini says. “It’s making
those with certain political beliefs a bit nervous.”

“That will likely happen tomorrow, in front of weekday morning witnesses.” Severus eyes each of
his Slytherins in turn. “I trust your absolute discretion in how you choose to inform the rest of the
school, as I’m aware there is widespread interest in this information. Trade wisely.”

“Yes, sir,” they reply in a chorus, even Astoria. Severus already knows how the information is going
to find its way to the Gryffindors. He only hopes she chooses a trade that is not simply snogging the
current Gryffindor Seeker.

You were just willing to snog the former Gryffindor Seeker, Severus’s thoughts taunt him. It takes a
great deal of effort not to let that awkward realization show on his face. He was honest in February
when he told Salazar that he is still adjusting to the whole of Nizar’s past. That damned 992 portrait
has not helped the situation at all by being a complete pain in the arse.

“Gregory Goyle has been expelled under the school charter’s wartime provisions, and is thus to
suffer in-castle banishment by dwelling in suitable quarters—not a prison cell—within the Dark
Tower.”

They all seem to sigh in relief and perk up at the same time. “The others Heads of House went for
the idea? And Dumbledore?” Miss Parangyo asks.

“Professor Dumbledore did not have a say, per the school charter,” Severus replies. “But yes. The
Heads of House all preferred the idea of in-castle banishment over Goyle being expelled, as he
would then run straight off to join his parents and a certain walking corpse.”
“I’m really glad,” Miss Bhatia says. “I mean, Goyle’s an idiot, but one is capable of outgrowing idiocy. We knew Professor McGonagall would side with you regarding the idea, anyway.”

“The Ravenclaws were about ninety percent sure of Professor Flitwick’s approval. Professor Sprout tends to be the difficulty.” Daphne rolls her eyes. “Sometimes that woman is entirely hopeless.”

Severus decides not to point out that Miss Greengrass just sounded very much like Miss Granger. It isn’t meant as an insult, and Daphne is capable of discerning her own changing habits without his assistance. “If there is nothing else, I’d like all of you to leave my office. There are a number of things I need to do before dinner, not least of which is making certain we have a functional Potions classroom on Monday morning.”

“Yes, sir.” Draco bites his lip, a mannerism that had otherwise all but disappeared since visiting Frogmore. “We’re glad you’re all right, sir. For those of us in the classroom on Friday—that was unpleasant to witness.”

“We panicked,” Pansy says, her disappointment in herself obvious. “And when we couldn’t hear you, we panicked even more. The elves couldn’t hear us when it occurred to Weasley to try for it, too.”

“Unfortunately, my classroom is warded against house-elf intrusion after several students during my first years of teaching attempted to use their own house-elves to help them to cheat,” Severus tells them. “Despite what occurred, I’m in no hurry to lift that ban.”

“Oh, understandable. It was still completely badass in the way you saved all our lives though, sir.” Zabini grins without an ounce of shame when Severus eyes him for the language.

It’s Warrington who lingers, though not without earning an odd look from Miss Greenwood. He makes a disgruntled face and places his hand over his left arm, exactly where the Dark Mark would be. She glances down, looks up at Warrington again, and nods before departing.

Interesting. “I was not aware that Miss Greenwood was aware of you being Marked, Mister Warrington.”

“I told her, in private. I didn’t want a war mage to kill me if she discovered the Mark by accident when I’ve been trying to spend more time with the intelligent sorts. It would look too much like spying for the wrong team,” Warrington replies. “I trust her to be discreet, but this part should be for just you to hear. You’re our Head of House; you can decide if she needs to know.”

Severus nods. “Very well, Mister Warrington. I take it you have a more specific update regarding our House’s Marked idiots?”

“Yes, sir.” Warrington makes a sour face that is mindful of his expressions after a Quidditch loss. “If anything useful came out of Goyle trying to kill you, it’s that the results have made the Marked idiots nervous. They’re aware that since Goyle is undeniably guilty, something is going to happen to him. Considering that it’s you, sir, they know it will be significant.”

“They don’t wish to be expelled,” Severus surmises.

Warrington considers it. “I think some of them wouldn’t care one way or another, sir, but the others have parents who are smart enough to remind them that their N.E.W.T. scores will mean a lot if they try to land a job in the Ministry. I think that part is going to be true no matter who controls the Ministry when the war is done.”

“The cultural emphasis is strong, yes,” Severus says in agreement. “It is one of the reasons why I
encourage all sixth-year Slytherins to keep their N.E.W.T.s in mind rather than delay that concern until seventh year.”

“Yeah. Next year.” Warrington’s sour expression returns. “I don’t think the Marked idiots will give up entirely, but if they come back after Easter Break…that’s when I’d look for them to make another attempt—something they think they could pull off without getting caught. It’s probably the sort of planning that would make him happy, too.”

“It would, yes.” Unfortunately, Severus thinks. “Anything else?”

“I think if they’re ever pushed on it, there are a couple of Marked idiots who might decide not to join with You-Know Who. I’m not going to name anyone, sir, as I could be wrong. I just…I’ve just been getting that impression.”

“It’s good to trust your instincts, and wiser still not to rely on them as a certainty.” Severus tilts his head in the direction of the door. “Thank you for the information, Mister Warrington. Believe it or not, it is nice to know I won’t have to face two subpar assassination attempts in a single week.”

Warrington’s face cracks into a brief grin. “Subpar. Only you, sir.”

Once Warrington is gone from his office, Severus takes up quill and paper, writing down the full list of every ingredient he stored on the classroom shelves. If a bottle survived unbroken at the bottom of the well, then he will simply have extra, but it is wisest to assume none are salvageable.

If he wants this resupply done swiftly, it will mean dealing with bloody Dogweed and Deathcap in Hogsmeade. He will send his requests via elf to the shops in Diagon Alley, as well, but they have more customers. It would take longer for those apothecaries to gather what he needs.

Narrow it down, Severus decides, and checks the lesson schedule for the next week. Half of what is listed the students are meant to supply for themselves, but he writes down every single potions component, mentally subtracts what the students will use for class, and makes an additional note of which ingredients will thus need to be ordered in larger amounts.

Severus considers it and decides he will declare it a favor if Materia Medica Magicae would provide the first of the necessary ingredients for Monday’s classes, delivered to him by owl at breakfast in the morning. He is a Potions Master, a professor of Hogwarts, and a fucking war mage. If they’re fool enough to find the idea of a favor meaningless, then there is always Slug and Jiggers …as well as Dogweed and Deathcap.

God, he really does not want to deal with Dogweed and Deathcap. The last time he visited their premises, he insulted their entire product line. The insults were deserved, but that won’t make them inclined to offer their speedy assistance, owed favor or not.

When Severus is done, he has three lists: the first details Monday’s needs; the second is his class needs for the entire week; the third list is every other ingredient remaining to be replaced that was not among those safely stored away in the walk-in cupboard. The floor Vanished in there, too, but the closed door prevented students from being flung at its shelving. His only other concern in that regard would be the younger years’ cauldrons, which were all stored within the cupboard on the floor.

Severus makes two duplicates of each list, making certain his magical signature is on each one. Then, when a random realization occurs to him, he picks up a much smaller bit of rolled-up paper and writes a brief note on it.

Now he needs messengers that are swifter than owls. “Filky! Tinny! Rubinny!”
The three house-elves pop into the room in front of his desk, though Tinny and Rubinny look surprised to have been summoned. “What is it, Professor Snape?” Filky asks politely.

“I am in need of swift messengers in order to be prepared for class in the morning.” Severus considers the politics at play before continuing. An entire castle full of elves are beginning to realize and resent the centuries of slavery they endured. They won’t take it out on Hogwarts, not when it is Hogwarts herself who shelters them by their contract being honored anew, but Severus would rather not incite them to anger over an issue of poor manners. “I would appreciate having your assistance.”

Filky looks pleased; the other two elves perk up at once. “The Slytherin Professor is needing only to ask,” Tinny says. “What does Professor Snape require?”

Severus holds the first bundle of scrolls out to Filky. “Please take this to the proprietors of Materia Medic Magicae in Diagon Alley, and be certain it is put into the hands of one of the owners, not a mere assistant. Wait for their answer; if they cannot or will not respond to the request, then I would like Tinny to take this bundle…” Severus hands the next set to the shorter elf, “…to Slug and Jiggers, also in Diagon Alley. If they, too, give you a negative response, then I have no choice.” Severus gives the final bundle to Rubinny. “This is to go to Dogweed and Deathcap in Hogsmeade, but please wait until Filky and Tinny have made their attempts. The Hogsmeade shop is my last choice.”

The elves seem amused by the particulars of his request. “We’ll be taking care of this at once, Professor,” Filky assures him cheerfully. “They’ll need time to make good choices.” She pauses. “Filky is not above encouraging them, Professor.” Then she Disapparates, followed quickly by the other two.

Filky the house-elf might be about to politely threaten an apothecary on his behalf. Fuck, Severus is never going to be able to do his ingredients-shopping in Britain ever again.

*          *          *          *

Ron isn’t doing his homework this weekend, and for once, he has a perfect, entirely valid excuse that Hermione can’t argue with: his bookbag is buried under rubble, along with all of the assignments he’d picked up throughout the day. Except Potions, but that is Goyle’s fault, not Ron’s. It’s possibly the most relaxing weekend he’s had all year thanks to the ruddy O.W.L.s, and he has taken advantage of it by doing nothing as often as possible.

He glances over from his newest book on the Chudley Cannons when something moving catches his eye. Neville is staring at a scroll that just fell down in front of him as if it’s going to eat him. “Uh… it’s just paper, Nev,” Ron says when Neville doesn’t move.

“It’s Professor Snape’s paper!” Neville squeaks.

Ron looks at the scroll parked on Neville’s bed, but he has no idea how Neville can tell who it’s from. It isn’t marked by Snape’s writing, or even a seal. “Neville, if he was going to poison you, I doubt he’d do it in Gryffindor Tower. Professor McGonagall would rip him to bits.”

“That really isn’t helping!” Neville retorts, but at least he picks up the scroll. He still unrolls it like he expects it to explode. It’s Snape, so Ron decides that isn’t entirely unlikely. Probably not Slytherin, though.
“Well?” Ron prompts when Neville just gapes at the scroll. “What’s it say?”

“Uh.” Neville swallows. “Mister Longbottom, if you attempt to skive off on Potions class Tuesday morning, I will not bother with poisons. I will inform your grandmother. That’s it. That’s all it says. He didn’t even sign it. Is that a threat or encouragement, Ron?”

“Mate, it's Snape,” Ron replies. “You know with him, it’s usually both.”
Reparation

Chapter Summary

"They changed so much of my school, and I’ve yet to see a change made for a good and just cause."

Chapter Notes

Someone did me a solid. <3

So: chapter!

Severus approaches his classroom after dinner that evening to find Salazar, Albus, Minerva, and Filius waiting for him. “This is a bit more assistance than I expected.” Salazar was an obvious choice, given that he’s the only one who can restore the classroom floor. The presence of the others is a surprise, as is Nizar’s absence.

“It’s a fine distraction from this afternoon’s funeral,” Salazar explains.

“I see.” Severus feels discomfort crawl up his spine to take residence in his chest. “How were the Finch-Fletchley funerals?”

“It was a nice service, but Mister Finch-Fletchley is now drugged and slumbering in the hospital wing.” Filius’s expression is marked by sympathy. “He kept that stiff upper lip until the very end, but when the first handful of earth was tossed…”

“I understand,” Severus interrupts, not needing further details. He is not the heartless monster many of his students are still willing to believe him to be. Mister Finch-Fletchley’s Potions grade for anything done this week or the next won’t count toward his final average, though Severus will quietly make suggestions on what the young man should study for the Potions O.W.L. if he neglects to see to the lessons.

“The classroom will also be repaired faster if all of us are assisting,” Dumbledore says in a mild voice, though at least he is refraining from his infernal, infuriating twinkling. “None of us want you performing magic today unless it is necessary. Poppy is insistent on the matter. Tomorrow will come along soon enough, Severus.”

Severus grants them a curt nod, deciding that Poppy doesn’t need to know that he has Apparated today without difficulty. “Very well.”

They allow Severus to lead the way inside, though he keeps walking until he is standing beneath the false, enchanted windows that allow a simulacrum of natural light into the classroom. The others take up positions until they have surrounded the massive chamber in his floor.

Severus isn’t fond of forced inactivity, but cleaning up this mess is a daunting prospect. If the others
do all the work, that will at least give him the opportunity to examine everything that is levitated out of the chamber. “Did anyone ever determine what this space was once used for?”

“It’s one of the original sleeping chambers created for those who dwelled in the dungeon rooms beneath the lake, the students who showed the most inclination to be apprenticed to a Slytherin,” Salazar answers. “Whoever changed the individual chambers to group sleeping rooms did not discard the individual spaces. They simply walled off each room and abandoned them. Idiots.”

The idea of separate chambers is an intriguing concept, but one Severus will ponder later. “Let’s get this over with, please.”

Filius is the first to raise his wand, focusing on the workbenches. Minerva chooses the various seats, including what is left of the chair that used to live behind Severus’s desk. Dumbledore, because he is still a bloody magpie, begins gathering up the glittering, multi-colored bits of broken glass the used to house a great deal of potions ingredients. Salazar alternatively lifts student possessions and stones as they are uncovered. The students' belongings are placed in a single pile on the floor, though Salazar leaves the rocks hovering near the ceiling. Severus supposes it’s easier to use existing material to rebuild the floor rather than call forth more from the earth.

“If all of the wooden splinters are recovered, I believe the workbenches are repairable,” Filius notes when he has the bulk of them gathered in the air, though they’re kept separate from Salazar’s growing, floating pile of rubble. Severus nods in agreement; a repaired potions workbench won't harm a brewing potion unless said potion is spilled onto the wood—and then it’s the workbench that suffers, not the potion. Filius smiles and begins whistling as he reassembles the benches, one at a time.

“The seating, Severus, is not salvageable,” Minerva informs him. “I would ask the elves to search the castle for replacements. Given what Nizar has said of the infamous Rubbish Room, I doubt you’ll have difficulty on that front.”

“Most likely not, no.” Severus does regret the loss of his own chair, though. He’d just broken that one in properly after an idiot fourth-year dissolved its predecessor two terms ago. “My desk?”

Minerva rotates the desk in question to examine it. Half of its drawers are missing, and the wood has splintered and cracked. “Everything that used to reside in your missing drawers is down there, I imagine. Unfortunately, it sounds as if everything that was in the locked drawers did not survive the fall.”

Severus growls, hearing the distinct sound of broken glass as the desk is floated about. God dammit. Ink will have soaked everything within the first locked drawer, and there were unmarked essays inside. He despises the idea of letting the ingrates get away with not completing an essay, but it is, for once, not due to their lazy incompetence. The other drawer held potions from his N.E.W.T. students that were capped and awaiting review for last Friday afternoon’s class.

“It might not be safe to keep that desk,” Severus realizes. “That locked bottom drawer is full of a multitude of spilled potions that have had the entire weekend to percolate together.”

Minerva gives him a dry look. “I’m a Transfiguration Master, Severus.” She then Banishes the drawer in question. “I’ll craft you a new one to replace it out of all of the lovely bits of broken chairs available.”

Severus inclines his head in gratitude. “Thank you.” Much like the chair, he didn’t fancy the idea of trying to accustom himself to a new desk.
“I could also reconstruct the glassware,” Dumbledore offers, but is frowning at the glittering cloud of glass he has gathered. “I’m just not certain if it is safe to do so, given what they are meant to contain.”

“If you choose to repair it, the glassware would need to be put to another purpose,” Severus says.

“Absolutely. Never trust shattered glass to store a potion ingredient unless it’s been melted down and re-forged,” Salazar adds. “I find myself glad that the students are meant to purchase their school bags from Malkin’s in Diagon Alley. They’re imbued with charms to protect their contents, so there is not much to replace aside from a few inkpots and quills. Was that Madam Malkin’s decision, or someone else’s?”

“Madam Malkin’s, I believe,” Dumbledore replies. “She is quite sensible in regards to student possessions, which is why she has the sole contract for the making and selling of Hogwarts student robes and hats.”

“Not that they prefer the hats,” Minerva says under her breath. “They are very much falling out of fashion.”

Severus rolls his eyes. Those hats were falling out of fashion in 1971, let alone 1996. “The quills and ink are easily replaced from school stores, though I imagine some of the more particular students will swarm Scrivenshaft’s in Hogsmeade for quills of their preference at first granted opportunity.”

Filius agrees at once, but he also has very specific taste in quills. “The students will be glad to have their belongings returned to them, regardless. I’ve already had an entire flock at my office door, concerned about the Charms essays that were in their buried bags. What of the potions ingredients among the mess, Severus?”

Severus shakes his head. “Banish everything when we’re done. It will all be contaminated, even if it had been yanked back out of that chamber immediately after it fell.”

Salazar grins at the first cauldron he lifts from the chamber. “Oh, that’s one hell of a dent. Bloody pewter cauldrons.” He floats it over to Severus for inspection. “What do you think, Severus? Repairable, or is it to be replacement? I don’t know the quality of what is sold to students in Diagon Alley, though I knew it was once poor.”

“They’re properly made. I tore the shop a new one during my first year when the Potages tried to sell pewter that wasn’t the proper blend of tin and copper.” Severus eyes the cauldron as it slowly turns in the air. “Repairable,” he decides. “As long as there are no cracks in the metal.”

“Good man,” Salazar murmurs, and begins sorting cauldrons. Those that suffered dents but not cracks are repaired and temporarily stuck to an empty bit of wall. Once they’re all sorted, Severus is relieved to find that there are only five losses out of the original twenty his students were using that day. The ones that fell from the storage cupboard have a few minor dents, but since nothing else crushed them, they are all easily repairable.

He will not make students who are not at fault replace their own cauldrons. He will supply the four needed replacements from among his small collection that previous students have abandoned over the years. Goyle’s cauldron can go out to the rubbish heap; Severus wouldn’t trust it to be capable of brewing safe potions after four years of use by a child who never bothered to read a potion’s instructions.

Once the dust has literally settled, he is fucking well sending the bill for all repairs directly to Vincent and Illustrious Goyle, and he is hiring a goblin to ensure its delivery. Mister Goyle’s parents can
enjoy the privilege of paying for this disaster.

The shelves that fell into the chamber are lifted out, repaired by Filius and Minerva, and then returned to their proper spots on the walls. The surviving shelves resume their original positions until they’re all exactly as he once placed them—though many show rather obvious signs of repair by sporting different-colored sections of wood. The bottles Dumbledore could reassemble are lying in a small pile, perhaps one-quarter of the original count. Severus’s desk is fully restored thanks to Minerva’s Transfiguration; the blackboard is not.

“Twice in one term,” Severus mutters. Sadly, this is not a record. The Potions classroom was partially destroyed three different times in 1986, and Bill Weasley is still apologizing to Severus for being the inadvertent cause of one of those instances. Losing the floor, however, is a new manner of destruction that Severus can add to his ever-growing list of ways in which students have demolished this classroom.

“That’s everything,” Minerva says at last. She’s eying the pile left in the bottom of the chamber, which is composed of broken bits of chairs, quills, scattered potions ingredients, shattered inkpots, spilled and dried cauldron contents, and the smaller bits of rubble that Salazar didn’t bother with. “Does anyone see anything that was missed?”

“No. That’s all of it.” Salazar waits until Severus agrees with that assessment before he Banishes all that remains. “Now to be putting the floor back. This may feel odd beneath your feet, so I suggest you not move.”

Severus holds still as the castle’s magic thickens the air. It no longer feels like a sudden, stifling sensation. It’s far more mindful of standing in a gentle (if energetic) cloud as he watches the floor literally regrow itself. Stone spreads outwards from the ledge they’re standing on, and is quickly joined by the broken pieces that Salazar kept hovering in the air. The entrance to the chamber below shrinks as the floor rapidly regains ground.

The stone meets in the center of the room with an audible grinding sound, closing off the chamber and creating a solid floor once more. “There.” Salazar blows out a long breath. “That was a bit worse than I thought it would be. I needed to call for stone from the earth to make up for a few losses.”

Severus glances at Salazar and suspects that Nizar might not need to concern himself with drugging his brother. “Thank you for fixing this mess. I’ve been ensconced in this room for long enough that I was not enjoying the idea of needing to find a new classroom.”

“You’re quite welcome.” Salazar gives Severus an expectant look. “Well?”

“In a moment.” Severus waits until Minerva, Filius, and Dumbledore have finished placing everything that remains back where it belongs, though Dumbledore Vanishes the glassware to take up residence God knows where.

Once the workbenches, cauldrons, and his desk are settled on the ground, and he has a full idea of exactly what he’ll still need to replace, the words emerge like the spitting of an enraged wildcat. “Hic est נַוָּיִז, נַוָּיִז! Est נַוָּיִז, נַוָּיִז excerebro, et saccus futuo, suus ’ plennus—ךֵּבַל האמה, אל שָׁמַיִם נַוָּיִז, נַוָּיִז! ¡Joder esta mierda!”

“Well!” Dumbledore looks fascinated. “That was educational.”

“Dare I ask?” Minerva asks Salazar.

Salazar smiles. “Varying iterations on the word fuck.”
Filius glances around the room. “I don’t think that particular litany went on for quite long enough.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Severus glances at Salazar before returning his attention to Dumbledore. “What time do you wish to see Mister Goyle formally ejected from the dormitories tomorrow?”

“Before breakfast, I should think,” Albus replies. “There is a room ready and waiting for him on the first storey of the Dark Tower.”

“Good. I will see you then. I have…” Severus feels his eye twitch at the idea of teaching tomorrow with a vastly underprepared classroom. “I still have a great deal of work to do in order to prepare for tomorrow. Thank you for making it a less trying proposition than it already is.”

Salazar remains after the others depart. “And you want something else aside from their absence.”

Severus nods. “I would very much like to see the original passage that would have led to those blocked-off bedrooms downstairs, but first…” He makes certain the door for his classroom is still open before calling Racifrass.

The older house-elf gives his classroom a disapproving look. “This happens too often, Professor Snape.”

Severus nods. “I’m aware. I’m granting you and your fellow elves twenty-four hours in which you can all come and go from this room as you please, as I need yet another favor.”

Racifrass listens to his requests for chairs to suit the room, the desk, and the need for another blackboard. “We will be doing our best to seek these things out in the Come-and-Go rubbish room,” the elf says. “Does Professor Snape wish for me to seek out new glassware?”

“No. That I prefer to see to myself, as I then know exactly where it’s been. Thank you, Racifrass.”

Finding the passage to that hidden chamber requires going directly through the Slytherin Common Room. There are several Slytherins still present in the room when they enter, including a cluster of Marked idiots gathered in the dark corner that used to host Nizar’s portrait. Salazar glances in their direction and smiles like he’s discovered the perfect prey to rip to shreds. Most of the Marked dunderheads are too stupid to look away.

“Wh-what are you doing here tonight, sir?” Zubeida Khan asks politely. She doesn’t see the Baby Death Eater that promptly mocks her stutter, but Severus does. He eyes Bassenthwaite in warning, who then pretends complete innocence. Imbecile. It’s as if their belief in Voldemort causes them to forget that Severus is the one who has final decision as to whether they deserve to graduate on to their next year, or if they will be repeating the entire term.

“Considering some redecoration, Miss Khan,” Salazar replies, giving her a much kinder smile than the Marked idiots earned. “Would it not be nice to be granted a choice between sharing a dormitory with others, or having a bedroom all to yourself while at school?”

Miss Khan’s eyes grow huge. “YES,” she says without a hint of a stutter. She isn’t the only one to do so; Miss Shetty, Higgs, Miss Parangyo, Ichijoh, Miss Bainbridge, and Boyle all look entranced by the idea of privacy.

“Then we’ll see what there is to be done,” Salazar promises before he and Severus take the stairs down to the lower dormitories. Salazar stops on the third level, where the fifth-years reside. The stone corridor goes on long past the entrance to the dormitory, but it has never been used for much other than to extend the gathering space for illicit Slytherin celebrations.
“This is it.” Salazar indicates the rest of the corridor. “There was once a line of individual sleeping chambers that went down to the end of the passage.”

“And now it’s a single dorm split by gender for each year. All of this space is utterly wasted.” Severus eyes the corridor in displeasure. “I think it’s a fair assumption that someone stupid made that decision.”

“Some twit who thought they knew better than we,” Salazar agrees. “The idea of a shared sleeping chamber for students was already a common idea when this school was Founded, but it was not an idea we wished to emulate. People oft do not handle forced cohabitation very well. Humans are social creatures, but we do like to be alone on occasion. Even when it was common for families to share a single home without walls, it was understood that a request for solitude should be honored. If you’ve nowhere to escape, the frustration builds—and in a magician, that could lead to the sort of accidental outburst that injures both people and property.”

Severus runs his hand along the wall and frowns. “Every single level of the dormitories has a corridor like this. I wonder if the towers are the same, or the Hufflepuff dormitories.”

“The towers used magical space to create room for all. That magical space is entirely gone,” Salazar answers him. “It can be put back, but convincing the others that perhaps the close confinement of the dormitories is not the best solution…”

“Or at the very least, it would be nice to convince them that a student deserves to choose whether they will share a dorm or dwell alone.” Severus certainly would have appreciated the option. He still recalls how much he wanted to drown his dorm mates in the Black Lake, and that desire did not lessen with the passing years. “When Nizar first saw the student listing, he was shocked that there were only two hundred eighty-one students this term. How many students were common after the Founding, Salazar?”

“It did not take long for Hogewáþ to gain notice, and prestige, among the magicians of Europe. It also did not take long for it to become a shelter to those wishing to escape religious persecution. Galiena was among the first who had to stay here, and it was not only because her parents died.”

“It was dangerous for her to go home,” Severus realizes.

“Galiena’s aunt would gladly have claimed her, but some of the fools in her village already believed Galiena to be a demon because of her magic.” Salazar smiles. “We began with a mere handful of students. By 1005, fifteen years after the Founding, there were hundreds who dwelled within this castle. By then, we would have called it an oddity had our numbers been less than three hundred.”

“Then…all of these rooms would have been used. It was not merely a cheat in regards to being able to see what the future would bring because of Nizar.”

Salazar nods. “The Sorting Hat had been in use without mishap for a decade by then. It did not Sort students entirely by the likelihood of apprenticeship, or by supposed traits held by the four of us. There were not four separate student sitting rooms with chambers nearby, but five. The Hat Sorted our students by thinking on those who would be most likely to get on well with one another, as well as what sort of environment would be of most comfort. Those students slept down here, or in the chambers Helga created near her personal sitting room, the tower Rowena dwelled in, a new tower that would one day become Gryffindor Tower, and what you now know as the Headmaster’s Tower. That was the place for students to dwell when the Hat couldn’t make up its mind as to whose company they would suit.”

Severus frowns in displeasure. “There are no rooms in the Headmaster’s Tower but for
“And yet, the stairs for the Headmaster’s Tower do not begin on the ground floor, but on the fourth storey.” Salazar raises both eyebrows in pointed reminder. “Galfridus is not in his original home. The sleeping chambers for our earliest students still exist, but all access to them is blocked.”

“Are they blocked by that damned moving stairwell?” Severus asks, annoyed.

“No.” Salazar’s brow furrows. “The stairwell itself is not the problem. We were not ignorant of those with crippled limbs, nor would we deny them a home if it was needed. All of the stairwells in this castle were once magicked to move, but only for those who required that sort of assistance. That the Headmaster’s Tower retains that ability, and that it works at all times, while none of the others do…it is hard not to spend a day in a fury over that, Severus.”

Severus snorts. “That’s why those fucking staircases move, isn’t it?”

Salazar’s nod is wry fondness. “Whichever fool messed about with the castle’s magic did not know how to make the magic for the staircases disperse properly, so the stairs still move. They just no longer know how it is they’re meant to behave.”

“How can it be fixed?” Severus is thinking not only of Miss Condor, but of other students over the years who struggled with this blasted fucking castle’s endless stairs. He knows of several students who would have been in his own year—idiots who later chose to become Death Eaters—who never bothered to come to Hogwarts at all for that same reason.

“Now that Pomona has accepted the magic of the Northern Seat?” Salazar looks upward, as if seeing the staircases in question. “I think so. I can only do so much. This castle and her magic were almost at a point of no return, Severus. It will take some time for Hogewáþ to recover. If all else fails, then know that I think all four Heads of House could do so after midsummer. I can work easily with her stone in the dungeons because they are most strongly tied to me as their creator, and because they are buried within the earth.”

“That is…good, then,” Severus allows. He doesn’t want Salazar dead, but he understands the nature of contingency plans.

“Excellent. Let me see it, then,” is Salazar’s baffling response.

Severus scowls. “See what?”

“The seal of my family, properly made, is always obvious to me. It’s been driving me to wall-climbing since I first felt it lingering around you,” Salazar responds, grinning. “Show me.”

Severus rolls his eyes and removes the Invisibility Charm that hides the silver ring and its Deslizarzare crest from view. “Nizar didn’t mention you would notice.”

“He might not have recalled. Or I might not have told him. It isn’t just blood that makes it discernable to me—and yes, he did tie it to you by blood. Excellent.” Salazar finishes his inspection of the ring and sighs when Severus hides it again. “It’s too much to hope that he did such a thing properly, isn’t it?”

“He meant it as a means of easy location,” Severus says, trying to ignore his discomfort. His fingers are still touching the hidden ring on his left middle finger, and he jerks his hand away. He can’t afford to create that habit, not when it might tip off those whom he’d rather see dropped into a churning volcano.
“Better that than nothing at all then, I suppose.” Salazar mutters. “Back to the point of this venture, then.”

Severus watches as Salazar uses the castle’s magic to remove a section of the wall, revealing another hidden chamber. Unlike the one beneath the Potions classroom, this one is a disaster. “If you’re closely linked to the earth and the dungeons, then what of that stunt in the Headmaster’s office regarding Cornelius Fudge?”

“That took a great deal of plotting between myself and Hogwarts. Oh, lovely.” Salazar doesn’t sound impressed as he looks inside the revealed chamber. “It appears as if someone tried to nest Runespoors within.”

Runespoors. Severus groans and considers slapping his hand over his face. “For fuck’s sake. I’d entirely forgotten!”

“Forgotten what?” Salazar asks. “Given the events plaguing us for the past two months, it’s no surprise to me that things have slipped by the wayside.”

“There is a school-wide ban against literature regarding Runespoors unless said text is directly related to Care of Magical Creatures,” Severus explains. “It’s a ridiculous ban that serves no purpose, but Dumbledore won’t rescind it.”

Salazar looks perplexed. “Why does such a ban exist in the first place?”


“Oh.” Salazar rolls his eyes at the ceiling in frustration. “I’d wondered why your work was not kept anywhere in the school library, especially when that of all other staff members was easy to find. No doubt Dumbledore hopes to remain on neutral terms with Horace Slughorn, just in case he needs the cowardly fool for some purpose.”

“Horace Slughorn can come back to this school over his dead body,” Severus retorts.

“Given how little he attempted to salvage our Slytherins during the first war? I quite agree.” Salazar kicks over a bit of desiccated grass with his boot before he Banishes the mess, leaving a clean room behind. “Consider the ban rescinded; I will deal with Albus Dumbledore regarding the matter. Would you like it if I opened up all of these rooms? I could even shift the corridor so that it’s a circular ring that comes back to the stairwell again.”

That’s an easy decision to make. “Yes. I have no problem with anyone who wants to remain where they are, but I hated the dormitories from my very first night in this school. You know from hearing the response upstairs that I am far from the only one to feel that way. My only concern would be the lack of bathrooms.”

“A privy would have been an original part of each chamber.” Salazar points at each side of the empty chamber with his wand. “Look at the shape, rectangular rather than square. There was room for a bed, a chest, and a desk, with a wall to divide such space from a privy, water basin, and a proper bathtub. The fool who walled off these chambers removed every sign they’d ever been occupied, else it would be easy to discern what the room was once for.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Severus thinks of the corridors on every level, and how much he would like this returned to what it should be. If Severus is also accomplishing two goals with his decision by exhausting Salazar, thus keeping him from noticing anything amiss with the Founding Stone, then at least Salazar is the sort of man who would appreciate the tactic if the truth was known.
However, Severus is not in the mood to be entirely underhanded. “I would like to see such restorations on every level, but I am aware that the reconstruction of my classroom floor was draining. This can wait.”

“Perhaps, but...perhaps not. Summer is no longer so distant, Severus.” Salazar narrows his eyes, puts his free hand on the wall, and once again summons Hogwarts’ magic. A thin stone wall sprouts up from the floor within the empty chamber, growing until it merges with the ceiling to divide the space exactly the way Salazar described. A small section of the new wall is perfectly sized to fit a door.

“These things were once here, and Hogwarts remembers. It is easier to restore what was than it is to build things that are entirely new. Even you are capable of this.”

Severus nearly retreats at the very idea. “I think not.”

Salazar gives him an amused glance. “You’re tied into this castle’s magic as Slytherin’s Head of House, and this is very much a Slytherin part of the castle. Yes, you can. I wouldn’t attempt it all at once, but if you witness the work as I make the changes to one space, you can repeat it for the others just by asking her.”

“The idea of having that sort of power in this castle is daunting as hell, Salazar.”

“It should be. That means you respect it, and her.” Salazar walks to the opposite wall in the chamber; in moments, he has created two windows, one on each side of the dividing wall, that reveal the night-darkened green of the Black Lake. “It’s a magical window, not a real one, but it will serve nicely.”

Severus eyes the new additions warily. “Fine. Walls and windows are conceivably within my ability to learn to create. But Salazar: plumbing.”

Salazar laughs. “Good point. That will be a bit more difficult, and should wait for another day. For now, learn with me, Severus. We’ll uncover every chamber together, and by the time we’re done, you’ll understand exactly how to change what is necessary, and how to rid the castle of what is not.”

The process of uncovering all of the hidden chambers isn’t as draining as Severus thought it would be for himself. His work is still slow as he learns the nuances of flow within the castle’s magic. Calling forth stone does not come as easily to him as it does to Salazar, and neither does changing an entire hallway’s shape so that it become a circle instead of a straight line.

Salazar leans against the wall after the fifth-, fourth-, and third-year dormitory chambers have been revealed, if not fully restored. “This is nearly enough to make me feel my age.”

“It’s that tiring?” Severus asks. He is winded, not exhausted, but he has the excuse of sleeping through half of Friday and all of Saturday.

“Not so much that, though I believe sleep and I will be getting along fine tonight,” Salazar replies. “No, it’s...they changed so much of my school, Severus, and I’ve yet to see a change made for a good and just cause. I taught others of manipulating circumstances to create a desired end, but when the desired end serves no one but yourself…” He lets out a brief sigh. “In the grand scheme of things, these rooms mean little compared to the task of rebuilding Hogwarts’ educational curriculum, but it was not only a need for solitude that caused us to design the castle this way. There was further purpose for it.”

“What purpose was that?” Severus asks, curious.

Salazar rubs at his beard while considering his answer. “Many of our students came from poor
beginnings. Rowena, Godric, Sedemai, Orellana, and myself—we grew up familiar with the idea of privacy. Helga did not, as the Norse lived in a different fashion, but she immediately grew to love the idea of an underground dwelling that was no one’s domain but her own. There is a power in commanding your own space, Severus, no matter how slight or humble the space may be. The students who came to us claimed spaces that, for the duration of their schooling, belonged to no one but themselves. Such can do amazing things for a child’s confidence, and confidence of the self is one of the most important building stones of a magical education—in truth, any education. Without that confidence, the wand falters. The quill hesitates. The words remain silent and unspoken.”

He glances at Severus. “It is also far more difficult for a student of rich beginnings to lord their wealth over another when every student’s sleeping chamber is constructed exactly the same.”

“Clothing would be another matter,” Severus observes.

Salazar shakes his head. “No. We let no one school here without providing for them in every way that was needed. If the clothing on their backs was not sufficient, we made certain they had a wardrobe that suited. Perhaps it was not always as fine as a student from a noble family, but it was not of poor quality, either. Nizar is the one who had to turn the idea of such generosity into a bloody battle of wills.”

“How so?” Severus remembers well what he found in the child’s abandoned bedroom. It only now occurs to him that the school trunk was still nearly full of the clothing the child purchased for himself.

“One shirt, one jumper, one pair of denims, a single pair of socks, pants, and boots. Aside from a coin purse and a snowy owl, that is all Nizar had in his possession. It was literally a fight of months before Helga could drag him away to Edinburgh and London in order to fetch the makings of a proper wardrobe.”

Severus feels an intense rush of unwanted shame and guilt. How often had he thought that child spoiled? He’d certainly focused on the wrong term. Stubborn would at least have been apt. “Given what you’ve said of Helga, I have to wonder why she allowed that sort of battle to go on so long.”

Salazar’s smile is faint and fond. “We didn’t wish to frighten him off. In those first weeks, it was a genuine concern. Nizar was...his trust in others was so utterly broken, Severus. There are days when I wake and am still amazed that he recovered enough faith in himself and others to trust my family, let alone the others who resided in the castle.”

“In that case, I’m surprised Myrddin survived his encounters with Nizar without ending up buried in a convenient hillside,” Severus says.

“You mean Myrddin’s granting of his titles of war mage and Protectoris to Nizar without so much as a warning?” Salazar grins. “The old goat knew what he was about. His manner was gods-awful, but he wouldn’t have done so if he didn’t recognize the potential before him. When Nizar was rid of the soul jar, he began to shine, but when he became Protectoris and Britanni Bellum dux Magum? Severus, that is when my brother thrived.”
Secreta Revelare

Chapter Summary

In which two Slytherins finally venture down into the Chamber of Secrets.

It does/does not go well.

Chapter Notes

Sorta-regularly-on-time Friday posting!

By the time Severus is free to meet with Nizar in his quarters, it’s much later than originally planned. He opens the door after knocking briefly. The castle’s magic responds to his touch, nudging him forward before Severus is fully aware of what’s happening.

His first, utterly baffled thought, is that someone must have brewed and then spilled an entire cauldron’s worth of Spiritum Veritatis in Nizar’s sitting room. He feels like he is drowning in the scents of warm lavender, sandalwood, and southern sunlight that has kissed skin and left proof of itself behind.

It’s extremely bloody distracting. “Nizar, what the fuck are you doing?” The words emerge high-pitched from his throat.

Nizar is seated on the floor, much the same as he had for last Tuesday’s Pictish magic, but the rug is still in place. He is also still fully dressed, if lacking boots. “Meditating. I’m usually rubbish at it, but needs must.”

That explains absolutely nothing at all as to why Nizar’s quarters smell this way. “Why?”

“You can’t fuck around with the Founding Stone while drugged,” Nizar replies. His voice is a far cry from Severus’s; he sounds calm and relaxed in a way that is exceptionally rare. He is usually too energetic for that, even when he is acting as patience personified. “It was either perform a rare successful meditation to prepare myself, or chance buggering it up. Hogwarts is attempting to assist me, and it’s distressing you. Why?”

“The entire room smells like you. Intensely.” Severus has to swallow. He is hard as a bloody rock and on the verge of resorting to a Bubble-head Charm just to cope.

“Oh.” Nizar tilts his head, but does not open his eyes. “During long and intricate magical workings, that can happen, but it’s rare. I smell what most reminds me of you if you are working overly long on a potion, but this might be a bit stronger. The castle’s magic and I have been working together to figure out exactly how the Protectoris ties are damaged. That will make the visit to the Founding Stone more efficient.”

“I didn’t realize Hogwarts was capable of that level of communication,” Severus says, trying to
distract himself.

“It’s not really…words.” Nizar finally opens his eyes, which—to his relief—appear entirely normal. “Images. Feelings. She’s gotten a lot more successful at sharing such things since Pomona was tied into the magic. If certain portraits don’t start waking within the week, I’ll be very surprised.”

Severus is relieved when the intensity of those scents diminishes down to levels that aren’t enticement to drag a Slytherin into the bedroom and shag him senseless. “You missed dinner.”

Nizar looks surprised. “I did? What time is it—oh. It’s a lot later than I thought it was,” he says as he glances at the wall clock. “I didn’t intend for that meditation to last hours. You’re later than expected, as well.”

“The classroom repair went well.” Severus begins to relax, no longer feeling overwhelmed by what is, apparently, a magical fucking side effect. It also helps him to understand the final puzzle of Spiritum Veritatis. He’s always been confounded by the fact that the potion works so well, even though its strength was not intentional. “Salazar then wanted to uncover the other chambers that were hidden in the Slytherin dormitories.”

“Well, as I missed the opportunity to drug him, that’s excellent news. Salazar might be exhausted enough not to notice when I go prodding at a magical node.” Nizar unfolds himself and stands up, maintaining that same calm bearing. Severus is almost envious; it requires a great deal of Occlumency to attain anything close to that state in himself.

“Whenever have you had the opportunity to learn to meditate?”

Nizar smiles. “Severus, I did mention we visited the East, and we did so often. Meditation was already an ancient practice, though they nearly despaired of me ever learning even a whit of it. I could handle the mental aspect thanks to Mind Magic, but the lack of movement? That is still not an easy thing to accomplish.” He pauses in consideration. “I’m pretty sure that Hogwarts helped me cheat that part so I wouldn’t botch the entire process.”

Severus resigns himself to an interesting evening, if Nizar’s shifting speech patterns are anything to go by. “Are you ready to go to this Stone, then?”

“Yes, but we can’t Apparate directly there. We can get close, but I can’t take us into the room itself.”

“Why not?” Severus asks.

“Because some idiot altered the Chamber below this castle, and I do not wish to inadvertently Apparate us directly into a wall,” Nizar replies dryly.

“It’s down there?” Severus has been in no hurry to visit the Chamber of Secrets, even if the worst danger it now holds is the rot of a dead pit viper.

“It’s the Founding Stone of the castle, which is tied directly into the earth, so, yes.” Nizar holds out his hand. “Please. Kanza and I are going to avoid the corpse in the Chamber until after the bit with the Stone is over and dealt with, but we’d still rather…we’d rather not have to witness it alone.”

“I would not be allowing you to go off alone to poke at a magical node, regardless.” Severus puts aside his fears, most of them outdated and useless, before grasping Nizar’s hand. The Side-Along Apparition is smooth and almost entirely absent of the unpleasant squeezing sensation that used to accompany magical travel.

Their arrival is noticed at once. “Two Slytherin professors? Well, if it isn’t my lucky day.” Myrtle is
resting with her arms and chin propped over the top of the girls’ bathroom stalls, all but leering at them.

“Hello, Myrtle,” Nizar says politely, inclining his head in an abbreviated bow of greeting that makes Myrtle all but swoon. “We’ll only be about for a few moments longer. I hope your evening is lovely.”

“It is now,” Myrtle replies, beaming. Then she sticks her tongue out at Severus before looping backwards to splash into the nearest commode. Severus sighs as water from the toilet puddles around his boots. At least these toilets go largely unused, so there is almost no chance of biological waste in that flood of water.

Nizar goes directly to the bank of sinks, peering at each one until he finds a sink with faucet handles that are slightly different from the rest. Then he hisses at it in stern instruction. There is a brief response in Parseltongue before that entire section of wall begins to move.

Severus never got to see the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, which sealed itself after Potter and Weasley were fool enough (and, he will privately admit, brave enough) to go down there. They even did as students should have done and took an instructor with them. Their mistake in the situation was in taking bloody Gilderoy Lockhart, who proved himself to be callous and malicious as well as vain when he tried to Obliviate a pair of children. That the spell rebounded on Lockhart still gives Severus the sensation of vengeful warm pleasure in his chest.

When the wall is done changing, it’s become a chaotic jumble of rearranged pipes, sinks, tiles, and other parts of the wall surrounding a rectangular gateway, which opens into a pitch black chasm. “It’s a bloody suicide leap?”

“You can fly and I can levitate,” Nizar responds, unconcerned. “However, Salazar told me that there is a simple solution that does not involve a leap of faith.” He reaches into the chasm and touches the inner wall, hissing another command that causes a circular stairwell to grow outwards from the stone. “There.”

Severus will admit that stairs improve the situation immensely, as does another bit of Parseltongue that causes green firelight to appear. There are torch brackets mounted to the wall on the stairwell, and the same green-lit brackets chase the length of the rough-hewn tunnel. It’s another excellent example of what Nizar meant when he spoke of how different the passage would be if Salazar had been the one to make it. The entrance near Severus’s quarters had been glossy perfection. This is callous magical blasting.

The doors at the end of the tunnel, with their entwined emerald serpents, are a shocking reminder of Slytherin’s Locket. “Oh, that is in poor taste,” Nizar mutters. He doesn’t speak to the serpents in his path; he merely puts his hands on top of them. The snakes hiss in pleasure and part to allow the doors to open.

“Recognition of the Heir of Slytherin?” Severus asks in a mild voice. He has no idea why that was disturbing to witness, but it sent a frisson of unease down his spine. He wonders how the child convinced the doors to open for him—or if it required any sort of convincing at all.

“Well, I am. So is Salazar, as Heir to the Ancient House of Serpents,” Nizar replies, passing through the doors. Severus reminds himself that the mad basilisk is long dead, and then steps into the Chamber of Secrets.

The same green flame illuminates the room, this time burning in silver brackets instead of the dull iron that lined the tunnel. “Someone was certainly intent on a theme,” Severus observes as they walk
down a long, tiled path to enter the greater cavern of the Chamber itself. The tile is not black, as he first thought, but an exceptionally deep green. The walls are the opposite, composed of an odd blend of sheared natural stone and tile. The pale colors cause the green torchlight to turn the Chamber into a brightly lit space.

“They were certainly intent on idiocy, you mean.” Nizar pauses at the end of the narrow path, glancing about, until he sees the shadowy heap of what must be deceased Jalaf on the other side of the room. “Oh, good. I don’t have to walk directly past him. Come on. This part will be unpleasant, and I don’t mean Jalaf.”

“Why?” Severus asks, but he soon finds out. Nizar leads them off the path and directly into the water that surrounds the central part of the room. “Please tell me there is a perfectly good explanation as to why you decided we needed to walk through frigid and questionable water instead of taking the path around it!”

“The entrance to the room that shelters the Founding Stone is very, very difficult to find unless you approach it directly,” Nizar answers. Some of the calm has left his voice, leaving disgruntlement in its wake. “This was once a spring, a source of water and a place to play and bathe for Jalaf and Kanza. I imagine the spring still feeds it, but this place is nothing like it once was. Salazar made certain this was an enlarged natural cavern, with smaller caves branching off from the central room that lead to passages within the castle, all of which respond to Parseltongue.”

That does explain how the dead basilisk was navigating the castle. “You’re saying that we are now viewing a pretentious monument to a dead man’s massive ego.”

“An irritating dead fuck’s massive ego, no less,” Nizar says.

They pause as they come nearest to the massive pillar in the center of the room. It is host to a carved giant face; its mouth is an open, gaping hole. Severus is not impressed. “If they were attempting to mimic the previous appearance of Salazar’s painting in the Entrance Hall, they failed.”

“That’s because it isn’t Salazar at all. That column is also a ridiculous addition unless the idiot who altered this room destabilized the cavern when doing so,” Nizar observes in a sour voice. “Not that it would surprise me. That would be the idiot who altered this room, and I know exactly who it is. He was a Slytherin student named Corvinus Gaunt. He never spoke to me, but I overheard enough to know that he was a Parselmouth.”

“A Gaunt. One of Voldemort’s forbearers.” Severus eyes the statue. “Voldemort looks nothing like him.”

“Those features were very much distinct to the Gaunts through most of the time I knew of them until the early 1800s, when they began the very bad habit of inbreeding with others too closely related to themselves. I would imagine it was Voldemort’s non-magical father who contributed enough genetic material for Tom Riddle to look more like one of Cadmus Peverell’s descendants.” Nizar is quiet for a moment. “That’s why it bothered me. Not as he is now, but when he was a child—Tom Riddle had the same color eyes as Cadmus.”

“Thus providing the reminder that he is related to you by two different bloodlines.” It’s a reminder that Severus finds disturbing. Dumbledore can rationalize Voldemort’s choice of Potter over Longbottom in regards to the original Prophecy all he likes, but the more Severus learns, the more he is convinced that it was always meant to be Harry James Potter.

“Thank you; I very much wanted to dwell on that right now,” Nizar mutters. “Come on. Once we’re out of the water, the Stone isn’t far.”
Severus casts Drying and Warming Charms on himself the moment they climb out of the frigid water. It’s an immediate improvement that soothes his rattled temper. “I apologize for the unwanted reminder. Where do we go now?”

Nizar holds up his illuminated wand, studying the rock face at the end of the cavern. “Apology accepted, and we’re going right there.” He points at a faint shadow that runs the full length of the stone from floor to ceiling. It would be easy to overlook, especially if a visitor to the Chamber was preoccupied by the statue and the giant fucking basilisk.

“How did Voldemort never find this place?”

Nizar gives him a brief glance. “He wouldn’t have wanted to sully himself with murky water, so it would never have occurred to him to walk directly through it. Without the water, Voldemort could have scoured this entire wall without ever finding a hint of the passage.”

Severus stares at him in suspicion. “You didn't need to go through the water to find the Stone.”

“No.”

“Then why—” Severus clenches his jaw, briefly angered, before he sets the emotion aside, unneeded and unwanted. “You wanted to be certain I could find this place on my own.”

Nizar smiles. “Yes.”

“You could have just told me,” Severus growls.

“Where is the fun in that?” Nizar counters. “Come on.”

Severus follows Nizar to the shadow, which doesn't reveal itself as a narrow gap in the wall until they're literally standing right in front of it. Nizar turns to the side and slips into the passage. Severus, mindful of the shorter ceiling, does the same.

The passage becomes wide enough for him to turn face forward, but is still almost close enough for his shoulders to brush the stone on either side. He adds the illumination from his wand to Nizar’s in order to see more of what’s around him. This isn’t a carved passage like the tunnel that led to the Chamber, but a natural opening in the school’s bedrock. It’s small enough to make Severus feel claustrophobic; he hopes Nizar isn't suffering the same sensation.

It’s a relief when the passage abruptly becomes an open chamber, even though it’s small, half the size of a standard Hogwarts classroom. What makes the room odd compared to the passage is that it's perfectly square, the stone smoothed and granted a silky texture by skilled magic.

Despite the low ceiling and the otherwise unceasing darkness broken only by their wands, the room still has a sensation of light to it. Severus considers the feeling and thinks it’s rather like being buoyed up by ocean waves.

He glances over at Nizar and finds that same relief of being free from the passage mirrored on his face. Then Nizar points at the center of the room. “There. That’s her Founding Stone.”

Severus studies the simple, unassuming rock that is in the exact center of the room. It's a bit rough-hewn, but perfectly rectangular, evidence of decent stonemasonry from a millennium ago. Except for the evidence of strong magic Severus can sense, like a vibration beneath his feet, the Founding Stone seems completely unexceptional. “Myrddin was a firm believer in an utter lack of showmanship, wasn’t he?”
“If you’d ever witnessed that man’s grooming…” Nizar smiles at the thought. “Every castle ever constructed had a foundation stone, the first block placed before building the walls that would shelter those within. This room was originally accessible by way of a stairwell in the castle above until we realized that students having easy access to the Founding Stone was a terrible idea. Salazar had been plotting to one day place basilisk protectors in the school, so the existing chamber had already been expanded to the size it is now. When the stairwell was removed, we altered the entrance to this passage to make the Founding Stone all but impossible to find.

“To make Hogewâþ what she is, Myrddin tied the strength of the magical node in this earth to the castle’s Founding Stone. Then the four Founders were each tied into the Stone as Keepers of Hogewâþ’s magic.”

“I shouldn’t touch that, should I?” It isn’t really a question, but Severus would rather be certain. Nizar looks up from his study of the Stone. “You could, but you would want to be prepared. You’d want to know exactly what your purpose in touching it was. You’d want someone with you in case of accidents. However, touching the Stone is the equivalent of plugging your body into pure magic. Without knowledge of how magic feels, or the direct guidance of an Elemental Magician like Myrddin, the result could be madness. Or a pile of ash. I suppose I don’t recommend touching it, no.”

“If you’re touching the Stone, and I’m touching you, would it turn you into a conduit that would then reduce me to madness or ash?” Severus asks in a dry voice.

It isn’t reassuring that Nizar has to stop and think on his answer. “I don’t think so, no. Hogewâþ is going to be assisting me, and she doesn’t want to see you hurt, so…no. It won’t be a problem.” He glances at his wand; the light from his spell vanishes before he hands his wand over to Severus. “Please hold this for me. It might interfere with the magic I’m about to be dealing with, or the magic might interfere with it. I’d rather my wand remain the way it is.”

Severus tucks Nizar’s wand into his robe sleeve. Then he holds out both hands as Kanza peeks out from beneath Nizar’s collar, glides down his arm, and coils up in Severus’s hands. “Please do pick a spot that is not there,” Severus tells the basilisk. “I need my hands available.” Kanza’s tongue darts out in a way that really does seem mocking before she twines around his wrist, and then decides to crawl under his sleeve to climb up to his neck. “That isn’t acceptable!” Severus complains, but the basilisk ignores him.

“She does that. Basilisks don’t really have a concept of privacy regarding clothing and skin,” Nizar explains with a fond look. He resigns himself to a basilisk with no manners.

Severus didn’t think on it much that afternoon, but as Kanza loops herself around his neck, she seems longer now than when she first did this to him in November. “Are you ready, and can I have the results of her shedding when it happens?”

“Not without a good trade, and no, not really,” Nizar admits, but he holds out his hand for Severus to take. “Once I touch it, count out three seconds. Then please remove me from the Stone.”

“Is that enough time?”

“If you’re working with this sort of magic, time is…” Nizar trails off. “One of the non-magical scientists that Adele is studying says that time is relative. He has an entire theory about it. Three seconds for you will feel like enough time for me to do what must be done because it’s exactly what I need.”
Severus resolves to himself that he is going to be accosting Miss Greenwood and borrowing whatever book she has on that theory. It not only sounds intriguing, but applicable to his entire bloody life—especially now that he is tied to a magical castle as a point on its compass, and to the land of Britain as a war mage. “Whenever you’re ready. I swear I’ll see to it that you’re safe.”

Nizar smiles at him. “Funny how vows can overlap, isn’t it?” he asks, and then he reaches out and places his hand on the Stone.

The result is so immediate, so intense, that Severus has no time to ponder Nizar’s words until much later. In the meantime, he is holding onto a man who feels like he just became the embodiment of contained electricity. It doesn’t hurt, but the magic crashes down around him as if it was an incoming tsunami.

Three seconds is less an actual count in his head and more pure instinct. Severus yanks Nizar free of the Stone, trying not to gasp for breath, and then swears aloud when Nizar crumples to the ground. “You didn’t mention that part!” he yells, but Nizar is too busy with unconsciousness to be bothered.

Severus gets his breathing under control and decides that they’re removing themselves from this bloody room. It takes him a moment to get the incantation right, but then he has a small globe of blue fire obediently trailing along behind him. “You are still so much heavier than you look,” he grumbles, picking up Nizar to carry him in his arms.

Kanza is a ticklish distraction when she speedily uncoils herself from Severus’s neck to drop down onto Nizar’s chest. As Severus navigates the narrow passage while edging along sideways, Kanza flicks her tongue out several times to taste Nizar’s skin. “Well? What’s your opinion, then?”

The basilisk’s response is to curl around Nizar’s throat and settle in. Severus decides to take that as a good sign. Kanza is more than capable of demonstrating her distress if she has concerns about Nizar’s well-being.

The green light in the Chamber of Secrets is a welcome sight, even if the rotten hint of dead basilisk is not wanted in the slightest. Severus considers the room before placing Nizar down on the tiled pathway directly opposite the corpse, with that ugly damned statue blocking the view. He doesn’t know if they should go upstairs, if Nizar will wake in moments or hours, or if there is something Severus should do to assist the process.

Severus does what he has always chosen to do in questionable situations: he waits.

Fortunately, he does not have to wait long. Nizar sits bolt-upright, wide-eyed. “Oh, fuck, please tell me that someone finally got around to giving these fifth-years the bloody sex education lecture!” are his first bewildering words.

Severus stares at him for a moment. “I’m not certain I want to know, but yes: that stupidly delayed education was carried out the first month of term. Poppy is still angry at Dumbledore for using the events of Sirius Black’s escape and the bloody Triwizard Tournament to delay it, as she had to assist one student in that child’s year with ending an accidental pregnancy, and two more with a sexually transmitted disease far more common in non-magical circles.”

“Oh. Good. Because I just woke up recalling one of the most embarrassing conversations I’ve ever had in my life. I was trying to figure out why I was far too old for what should have been a topic handled at age ten.” Nizar shoves his hands into his hair, still horrified. “Pregnant at fourteen. Gods. Does Dumbledore not recall that students who’ve reached puberty will snog like their life depends on it, even if they don’t know what the hell they’re doing?”
“I’m almost certain he’s been single since he was wise enough to dump Grindelwald after graduating Hogwarts.” Severus makes a face, because he does not want to think about Dumbledore or Grindelwald in any such context. “Perhaps one hundred years of chastity has reinforced the notion that being chaste is normal instead of the exception, especially with that distinct lack of concern about pregnancy.”

“Oh he’s just a complete imbecile.” Nizar lets his hands drop and then shakes his head. “Oh, gods. Godric’s face was the same color as his hair during most of that conversation, and that man was polyamorous!”

“I’m given to understand that he was also straight,” Severus replies. “I would imagine your brother arranged that conversation for your benefit and his vengeance.”

“I’m not certain Godric and Salazar ever stopped fucking with each other. They had too much fun doing so.” Nizar tilts his head. “It was definitely Rowena who taught me how to magically castrate a bastard who misbehaved if we were in a committed relationship, though.”

Severus leans back in alarm. “Please consider a conversation before the castration if you ever suspect that of me.”

“I thought it was overkill, myself, especially as she was still angry at her deceased husband,” Nizar says. “Granted…” He trails off, scowling. “Oh, come on! No! I didn’t want to remember that!”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “This should be entertaining.”

“No, it isn’t! This feels like a brand-new memory, and it’s over a thousand years old. There isn’t even anyone in this castle I can stab!” Nizar shouts back in fury.

Severus resists the urge to immediately volunteer to find Ratier Gibbon. “Why do you currently desire to stab someone who is doubtless long dead?”

“Oh, he’s dead, all right,” Nizar says. Severus can’t tell if Nizar is sulking or furious. It’s possible that it might be both at once. “I recalled the other unfortunate reason why I never courted anyone before you.”

“Old boyfriend?” Severus asks in a neutral, uninterested tone.

He is not jealous. Given Nizar’s outrage, he doesn’t have reason to be.

Fuck, he’s jealous. Severus considers the merits of banging his head against the floor.

“Pfft. No.” Nizar crosses his arms. “But I did spend a great deal of time in his company. It had just… I’d just begun to consider the notion of making it official. Of courting him. Then we discovered that his only purpose in coming to Hogewáþ was to act as a spy for someone who wanted to kill us all and re-start the school as a dedicated means to creating willing magical assassins. Gilbert decided that the fastest way to accomplish the goal of breaching the castle’s defences was through her protector.”

“How did you find out?” Severus asks. Nizar is right; it isn’t entertaining in the slightest, especially as Severus now also wants to kill someone who is long dead.

“Oh, his friends turned up. Unlike other non-magical armies, somehow they could see the castle. The only way that would have been possible is if someone inside the school had granted them the means. I caught Gilbert in the midst of attempting to escape outside to join them.”

Nizar runs his hands down his face, jaw opening in a tired stretch rather than a yawn. “The elves
were a bit cross with me for using so many kitchen blades to stab the fucker before I tossed him from the battlements to join his allies. Helga was the one to point out that I’d missed a few spots, and if I’d only asked her, she would have loaned me the knives to finish off the job of turning Gilbert into a pincushion. Of course, I was heavily drugged when she made that suggestion, and spent at least an hour afterwards trying to figure out why I needed to stab a porcupine.”

Severus can put those pieces together easily enough. “I take it the result of this subterfuge was the same battle of Elfric’s curiosity and the battle ax to the shoulder.”

“That would be the one, yes.” Nizar rubs his eyes again. It strikes Severus that interacting with the Founding Stone must have been a draining experience, even if it was also a restorative one.

“I agree with Helga.”

Nizar grins. “Yes, well, I was in a hurry, what with the army suddenly at our door. If I’d had more time to devote to it, I’d have stabbed every organ in his body in alphabetical order but for leaving his heart for last.”

Severus should not approve of that, or find it a physically desirable trait in another, but he made peace with the fact that he is not a bloody saint a long time ago. “I’d still appreciate it if you’d initiate a conversation with me first, rather than commencing with immediate stabbing.”

Nizar gives him an intent look. “Severus, love, you are possibly one man out of a very small number of people on this earth who I would trust never to do any such thing.”

“While the sentiment is appreciated…” Severus tries not to grimace in distaste.

“No terms of endearment in English?” Nizar asks.

“It sounds odd,” Severus explains, even if it’s a ridiculous complaint. “It doesn’t bother me at all in another language, but not…that.” He pauses. “Not in bloody French, either.”

“That won’t be a difficulty. I never was much fond of franceis.” Nizar holds out his hand. “Please help me to stand. I could probably manage it on my own, but if I fall on my face on the first attempt, I’d feel ridiculous.”

Severus stands up first, stretching to release far too much tension from his spine and shoulders. Then he grasps Nizar’s hand and pulls him upright. “Any difficulties?”

“No.” Nizar tilts his head back and forth until his neck emits a disturbingly loud crack. “Better.”

“Did it work?” Severus asks. “Did you manage to repair your connection to Hogwarts?”

Nizar reaches up and strokes Kanza’s scales, which are visible just above his shirt collar. “I think so. I’ll know for certain after I sleep—what is it, dearest?” he asks as Kanza slides out to wrap around his hand.

The basilisk hisses at him, and Nizar frowns. “I did say that we would. No, I didn’t forget!” he adds indignantly when Kanza speaks again. “I promised we would see to Jalaf, and that is next on the list. Then I am immediately going upstairs to happily fall into my own bed. Unless…” He glances at Severus. “It’s Sunday evening, and I know what your preferences are. If I’m still welcome after I told you the tale of stabbing my not-boyfriend at least fifty times with tableware.”

Severus gives him an amused look. “That is really not the sort of thing I find off-putting in the slightest. Besides, you were the one who just shoved your hand into a magical electrical socket.
Tonight is about your preferences for resting, not mine.”

“I’m really fine with either—you know what? I will stand here all night and discuss this to avoid Jalaf’s body, and that won’t get us anywhere.” Nizar takes the path around the water and its central statue. Severus follows close behind, even if he would like to avoid the corpse. The dead basilisk cannot possibly smell any better up close.

What remains of the corpse’s skin is a solid green that it must have been vibrant in life, before death and decay dulled the basilisk’s scales. They walk from the rear of the basilisk’s sprawled tail to its front, which is a journey of about thirty feet. Perhaps a bit less than that, but Severus isn’t in the mood to fuck with a dead basilisk just to get an accurate measurement.

The child killed this serpent at age twelve, Severus thinks in blank amazement as they reach the massive head and its frozen, gaping jaws. Given the prowess Nizar has displayed, he isn’t certain if it was the burgeoning growth of what would later be great skill, or just blind fucking luck.

Then he sees the gaping holes where the basilisk’s eyes would have been. That was not meant to be a pun, even if it was an accurate one.

Enough tissue and viscera remains to reveal how the serpent’s eyes were torn out by Fawkes’s talons and beak. That would have kept the child from instant death by stone-bound Petrification, but serpents rely on their sense of heat and sound more than they do their eyesight. Blindness wouldn’t have made the battle much easier.

Severus realizes he is hearing angry sounds and looks over to see Kanza reared up on Nizar’s shoulder, her mouth open wide as she unleashes a torrent of enraged hissing. “Is she upset?”

“No. Well, yes.” Nizar is gazing at the basilisk’s head, his jaw hanging open. “This is unexpected.”

“What? Is it recollection of the event in question?” Severus hopes not. He doubts it would be a pleasant memory, given how fond Nizar is of Kanza and basilisks in general.

He doubts Nizar wants to remember anything of himself nearly dying by basilisk fang.

Nizar closes his mouth and rubs his face, staring at the dead basilisk in bewilderment. “Kanza is angry because we’ve just discovered two problems. Do you still have my wand?”

Severus hands it over and watches as Nizar casts his Patronus. “Salazar, Desplazarse a la Sala Secreta. Llegue cerca de la grieta en la pared que esconde la Piedra Fundadora. Puedes vernos a la vez.”

“Please tell me what the hell is going on,” Severus requests after the basilisk Patronus vanishes through the wall.

“The most important thing?” Nizar lets out a deep sigh that somehow sounds like the departure of a long-carried weight. “That isn’t Jalaf.”
“Hermione. That rumor that Potter is with Professor Salazar’s people…”

“Not such a rumor.”

“It’s a bloody fucking construct!” Salazar shouts when he arrives and views the serpent’s corpse for the first time. Nizar winces and rubs at his ear as the sound echoes in the Chamber.

“She’s not a real basilisk at all, then.” Severus has been frowning since Nizar told him the truth about the serpent, his black eyes roaming the corpse as he makes a much more thorough inspection of its remains. “There isn’t even a place on her head for a plume, and these horns are wrong. I didn’t realize any of that until Nizar mentioned it.”

“It’s a very close approximation of a basilisk,” Salazar corrects, and then his expression twists in dismay. “When I Scried upon Tom Riddle’s use of the basilisk to murder a student, I thought I glimpsed a proper-looking basilisk, but I will admit I saw more Tom Riddle and of poor Myrtle’s death than I did of the basilisk itself.”

“That lack of clarity would not be your fault. You asked for Riddle, not the basilisk,” Nizar reminds him. “Which was still a foolish thing to do, by the way.”

Salazar ignores Nizar’s opinion of that stupidity, walking along the dead serpent’s length. “Magically and physically, this serpent is very real. She lived here, and unfortunately, she died down here…but she’s not a basilisk birthed by other basilisks. She was crafted by magic, and her appearance looks to be based on someone’s idea of what a basilisk is meant to look like rather than a basilisk in truth.”

“What did they get wrong in attempting to mimic Jalaf?” Severus asks. “Aside from the gender and her lack of proper horns.”

“I’ve never seen a basilisk that color,” Salazar answers after a moment. “The Burgos Nest is large enough to have a great deal of variety, but never have they birthed a basilisk that looks to have been the same color as an African green mamba. Basilisks have most often dwelled in caves without much light to them. They tend to have dark scales so that their prey can’t see them in the gloom of a cavern.”

“The eyes are wrong, too. Those were…” Nizar gives the castle a gentle nudge and asks to see the living false basilisk. Hogwarts obliges him, an image that involves the bright green serpent's head glimpsed in such a way that he can’t see the full strength of her eyes, but that's enough. Worse is the fact that it's the confrontation between a young and tangible Tom Riddle...and the child. At least he
can't remember that. “Its eyes were yellow and looked much like a normal serpent’s eyes but for their glow. A basilisk’s eyes are faceted to allow them better vision in confined, dark places.”

“Exactly,” Salazar says. “It makes it easier for them to wander around in a cave and maintain a clear idea of where they are, though nothing sounds more embarrassed than a juvenile basilisk who misjudged a passage and got themselves stuck in it.”

Kanza hisses out that she will never, ever be caught by a passage in such a ridiculous fashion. Nizar smiles and strokes her head in her favorite place, right where her horns will grow after she’s gained twenty feet and aged a full century.

That child didn’t kill Jalaf. That child didn’t kill a basilisk at all.

He can’t even remember being that child, and still Nizar feels such a tremendous relief that it’s as if he’s been robbed of breath.

"She's too large, but her fangs are correct.” Salazar eyes the stump of a broken fang in the basilisk’s mouth. “The poison, also. It would not have been capable of destroying the diary Horcrux, otherwise.”

“Don’t forget the bloody Petrification,” Severus says as Nizar places his hand over his right arm, just above his elbow. A vaguely circular scar is still there, a slight dip into his flesh that's almost invisible but for the texture. He hadn't even given thought to what caused it until now...and he's glad not to remember that, either.

“Yes, that as well.” Salazar stalks around to face the head of the serpent again. “The now-infuriating question becomes: where is Jalaf?”

Kanza is the first to voice the possibility that the created basilisk replaced Jalaf when a Parselmouth found him dead.

Severus, who is by default a pessimist, offers a different theory. “The legend of the Chamber of Secrets is centuries old. Perhaps a created basilisk was placed down here, most likely by Corvinus Gaunt, because when he opened the Chamber, he discovered it to be empty?”

“Jalaf would not simply leave. A basilisk who chooses to protect something will not simply depart from boredom,” Salazar responds.

“Unless he was given no choice in the matter,” Severus counters. “Otherwise, why place another basilisk here in the first place?”

“Jalaf would not have been inclined to obey a command to murder a student, no matter the blood flowing in Corvinus Gaunt’s veins.” Salazar shakes his head. “But he would not be easily killed, either, especially as Fawkes would have acted to—” He breaks off, eyes widening. “Fawkes would have acted to safeguard another of the castle’s protectors, just as Jalaf would do for him. Fawkes!”

The phoenix appears in the room in a bright bloom of flame that is painful to the eyes. He lands on Salazar’s outstretched arm and trills out a query that sounds decidedly ill-tempered. It’s late; Nizar thinks the phoenix was probably sleeping.

“My apologies. Jalaf is missing from this castle. I wanted to know if you knew what became of him,” Salazar tells the phoenix.

Fawkes cocks his head, fluffing his wings and tail. Then he looks at the dead serpent and trills a question.
"No—of course that isn’t Jalaf!" Salazar retorts. "She’s not even the right fucking color!"

"That’s informative, though. It means Fawkes wasn’t aware that Jalaf was removed from the castle. In fact, it had to have been willing, or Fawkes would have known something was amiss.” Nizar is choosing to believe that it was a removal, done by a Parselmouth with the ability to ensnare Jalaf by treachery and take him from Hogwarts. If Jalaf had died, there would still be remains to find in this Chamber. It’s not exactly easy to hide a dead basilisk. Their hides are immune to most forms of magic, especially as adults. Lifting even a dead basilisk with a levitation charm isn’t possible. It’s usually the rest of the nest who removes the body of a deceased nestmate, working together to take the large body to a part of their cavern that is their chosen resting place for the dead.

Then again, there is one other option. Nizar studies the column in the center of the room, comparing what space must be inside to the dead serpent. No, two serpents wouldn’t have fit in there due to the constructed serpent’s size. One cannot Transfigure a basilisk, either, thank the gods. Nizar would be truly enraged if someone had turned Jalaf into a piece of this pretentious décor.

"Yes, but—Fawkes, you cannot possibly tell me that you’ve forgotten what Jalaf looked like,” Salazar growls at the phoenix.

Fawkes ducks his head under his wing and lets out a long warble that is decidedly sheepish.

"You didn’t know what color Jalaf was in the first place.” Salazar squeezes his eyes shut. “I’ve tetrachromacy, and not once did it ever occur to me that a bird might have vision different from a human. Fawkes is describing something that sounds rather like UV light, but not quite. Blacks and greens show up as much the same color, which is not remotely similar to either.”

Severus looks baffled. “How the hell did you understand any of that?”

"Long practice,” Salazar replies, still frustrated. He sends Fawkes on his way with another burst of too-bright flame.

"And sometimes Fawkes is rather insistent on being understood,” Nizar says.

"Are there any established basilisk nests in Britain?" Severus asks after a minute of tense silence, surprising them both.

Salazar nods. “Ogof Ffynnon Ddu, a vast cave system in Wales. I’d no idea it hosted a nest at all until the discovery of the caves was announced in the late 1940s. When I went to have a look for myself, I could hear them. They’re a bit standoffish, given that another nest has claim on me, but they’d gone so long without glimpsing a human I could not much blame them for their caution.”

Kanza hisses that they should go there immediately. Nizar groans at the thought of traveling to Wales at this time of night, especially after mucking about with the Stone. “No, dearest. The nest will still be there another day.”

"I’ll go tomorrow, after the dinner hour,” Salazar murmurs. “Even if they don’t count Jalaf among their number, basilisks like to gossip as much as anyone. If they’ve heard any hint of a basilisk in Britain outside the bounds of their nest, they will be willing to tell me. I most likely will have to bribe them first, but that’s easily done.”

“Give them one of the giant fucking spiders roaming around the Forbidden Forest,” Nizar suggests. He’d really like to see them all gone from the woods, but he’s since discovered that the forbearer of the giant spiders is one of Hagrid’s pets. Friend. Something. Either way, Hagrid would be upset if the whole of the Acromantula Nest was suddenly located elsewhere.
Maybe Nizar can find out where Dumbledore stashed Fluffy the Cerberus in Greece and give Hagrid the dog back. If Hagrid is sufficiently distracted by the three-headed dog, perhaps he won’t notice the lack of spiders.

Salazar looks pleased by the idea. “That’s a thought. There are certainly enough of them roaming about, and the Ogof Ffynnon Dd Nest would consider it a challenge to hunt an Acromantula released in their caverns.” Then he turns around to regard the rest of the Chamber. “This is a pretentious pile of shit, isn’t it?”

“That does seem to be your brother’s opinion,” Severus agrees dryly.

“He’s entirely correct.” Salazar looks at the statue and rolls his eyes. “That’s a Gaunt if I’ve ever seen one. In fact, I’d say that’s either Corvinus himself, or his son. They looked much alike. Let’s leave this shithole, shall we? I’ll return it to rights another day.”

“Dead basilisks aren’t exactly easy to move,” Nizar says.

Salazar takes one last look at the dead serpent. “She’s not a real basilisk. I’ll find a way to remove her.”

It isn’t until they return to the ground floor by way of Apparition that Salazar gives in to curiosity. “I didn’t realize you’d changed your mind regarding your readiness to venture into that place. I hadn’t even yet done so until you called for me—or did something else occur to drive you down into that pretentious pit?”

“Insomnia,” Nizar replies, which is his usual answer for why he does anything off-schedule. “I’d also been speaking with the castle. We figured out how to repair the Protectoris link, but I needed to be near her heart to do so.”

“Near,” Salazar repeats, giving Nizar a shrewd look. “Does it look as if anyone has ever discovered the Founding Stone’s resting place?”

Nizar shakes his head. Salazar either knows exactly what was done and is willing to let it be, or he hasn’t thought on the Stone at all beyond the fact that Nizar would most certainly have visited it. “Sal, that room looked exactly the same as the last time we saw it together. Not even a speck of dust existed to hint that people have ever seen it.”

Salazar smiles. “Did it work, then? I know how much it disturbed you to discover that damage.”

“Most likely. I’d rather sleep on it before I’m more specific than that.”

After Salazar has Disapparated, off to resume sleep (or finally succumb to it), Severus glances at Nizar. “I really do admire your ability to tell the truth without saying anything truthful at all.”

“Nonsense. It was just true enough that he won’t have reason to be concerned.” Nizar looks at the stairs and makes a face. He will not be climbing those tonight, either. Once Severus has kindly Apparated them both upstairs, directly to his quarters, he says, “Besides, I just presented Salazar with such a distraction in the form of a missing basilisk that I doubt he’ll think on my reasons much at all.”

Severus helps Nizar to disrobe when Nizar discovers his arms are really not interested in being useful. He’s done too much this week, and has bloody well hit his limit. The morning will present him with the rare occasion in which he might very well oversleep and miss class entirely unless he sets an alarm.

No, that’s a terrible idea. The one and only time he’s attempted to use a magical alarm clock since
first November, he threw it across the room the moment he registered a sound that didn’t belong. The clock wasn’t capable of doing its job after that, not when it was in a multitude of pieces.

“I’ll wake you,” Severus offers. “I know to be on the other side of the bloody room, if need be, but I have a question.”

Nizar unclasps his boots and then wriggles his leg until the first boot obliges him by falling off his foot. The second boot is far less stubborn. “What?”

“A basilisk chooses their companion, not vice versa. Yes?”

“Yes.” Nizar calls for an elf long enough to stir up the hearth to ward off the chill. Kanza gladly slides down his hands to curl up in front of the fire. Another few weeks and she’ll lose interest in the hearth entirely, but the winds that arrive with the Lencten Equinox annoy her. “Kanza was immediate and adamant about me being her Chosen the moment she looked at me. Jalaf…” He smiles at the memory. “Jalaf was shy. A basilisk always knows, but it took him a few minutes to decide to sneak his way into Salazar’s hands.”

“Then it’s like a familial relationship. A bonding,” Severus says.

Nizar stands up, wanting a bath and knowing he’d do nothing more useful than fall asleep in the water. “Yes and no. You’re concerned about Salazar and Jalaf?”

“Am I correct if I say that I think you would go haring off across Britain if Kanza were similarly missing?”

“She would be doing the same, but it’s not a familial bonding. A magician’s relationship with a familiar is limited by the familiar’s lifespan. The magic that connects magician and familiar will only grant an animal so much extra time and health before succumbing to the nature of what they are.” Nizar tries to figure out the correct words. “It doesn’t matter that Salazar and Jalaf had only twenty-four years together before Salazar had to leave him behind. Jalaf and Kanza’s nest has been bound to the Deslizar line for centuries. That link was strong when it was new, and only grew stronger as time passed, but it isn’t necessarily a magical link. Aside from Parseltongue, we don’t use magic or mental bonds to speak or interact with each other. It’s…it’s different,” he finishes, well aware that his explanation is lacking.

“It sounds as if it’s more likely to be a blood bonding without actual bloodshed,” Severus muses. “Then the only way Salazar would be able to find Jalaf, if he survived whatever removed him from this castle, is for Salazar to locate him. Or for Jalaf to become aware of Salazar’s continued existence and find him. Or—could your magic locate him if Kanza’s blood was used?”

Nizar pushes open his bedroom door as he undoes the cuffs for his shirt, thinking that he has rarely seen so wanted a sight as his own blasted pillow. “I can’t currently recall if it works that way or not, and I’m not going to ask Kanza to shed basilisk blood until I’m certain.”

“Why?” Severus asks, but his voice has quieted, as if they were abed already.

“Powerful blood,” Nizar mutters. Fortunately, it takes almost no time at all to strip off clothes that still reek of dead basilisk and fall into bed. If Severus asks him any questions after that, Nizar isn’t aware of them.
On Monday morning, at seven o’clock exactly, Gregory Goyle is officially expelled from Hogwarts. Draco watches the proceedings from his place next to the fireplace, worrying at his lower lip. Greg stares at Professor Snape and Dumbledore after the announcement of his fate, blank and uncomprehending. Draco knows that Greg was expecting a different response—he might even have been coached on it by his fucking parents—but since the Heads of House chose something different, Greg doesn’t know what he’s meant to do. He won’t figure out how to react for a day or two, but it’s not for a lack of intelligence. Slow and stupid aren’t the same thing.

“He might learn better in the meantime,” Salazar’s portrait over the fireplace says. Draco realizes that he’s been muttering the entire diatribe under his breath.

“He might.” Draco crosses his arms as Professor Snape escorts Greg from the Common Room. Dumbledore says something to the Slytherins that Draco doesn’t even bother to pay attention to before he leaves, as well. Good riddance.

Professor Snape had that awful shuttered expression on his face that Draco saw a lot when their Head of House was still spying, but now Draco understands what it’s for. Sometimes it’s all about not letting on how you really feel. Draco is beginning to learn the difference on when it’s the right sort of decision, and when it’s the wrong reaction entirely.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Draco Malfoy.”

Draco glances up at the portrait, who is regarding him with the same sort of muted resolve that Professor Salazar often demonstrates in person. “I’m still really angry with Goyle.”

“That is understandable. But?”

“But…” Draco tries not to flinch when the Common Room wall slides shut with a final-sounding thump. “But he’s still my friend.”

The portrait nods his understanding. “And there is no reason Gregory Goyle cannot continue to be, but he must figure out this part of his path on his own, Draco Malfoy. Now off to breakfast with you. Stand tall. One of your own made a mistake. Show this school that others will not do the same.”

That’s a thought. Politics are always a nice distraction from feelings he doesn’t know how to cope with. Draco manages to gather Pansy, Blaise, Daphne, Astoria, Ona, Adele, Kinjal, Theo, Millicent, Zubeida, and Reiko—all Slytherins he knows are both intelligent and loyal to their House. There are more, but everyone flooded the Common Room this morning when Professor Snape warned them what was to happen, and Draco can’t get to them all.

“We’re Slytherins,” Draco says, trying not to quail in the face of so many somber, unhappy expressions. “We stand tall, and we stand together. Goyle fucked up. We’re never going to give anyone else a reason to believe that we’d do the same.”

“Too right.” Blaise swallows. “We’re better than anyone ever wanted to believe, and we’re going to keep proving it.”

Zubeida nudges Blaise. “G-good call. Let’s g-go get some f-food.”

They’re the first Slytherins to arrive in the Great Hall. The students from other Houses who’ve already arrived for breakfast fall silent when they enter.

Draco looks around and realizes he has an even better idea than a wall of solidarity. “We’ve all got
friends in other Houses, don’t we?”

“Sure we do—oh!” Pansy’s eyes light up. “Divide and conquer, baby.”

Astoria giggles and literally skips off to go sit with Edward Black and Ginny Weasley. Blaise and Millicent veer towards Luna at the Ravenclaw table, possibly to spend the morning discussing pure insanity. Ona finds Fred Weasley and politely shoves George away from his twin to sit down between them. Daphne goes to the Slytherin table because Hufflepuff Xavier Macnair is there, sitting with Zoe Accrington. Zubeida meanders over to sit next to Applebee, who simply scoots over to make room on the bench before she slings her arm over her shoulders. Draco didn’t expect that, but Applebee might be trying to adopt wayward Slytherins like a—well, like a Hufflepuff. A proper Viking Hufflepuff. Adele also sits with them, and is promptly joined by Susan Bones. Kinjal finds Roshan; Theo joins Seamus and Dean. Reiko debates her options before noticing Finch-Fletchley sitting alone at the end of the Hufflepuff table. She almost bolts in that direction, quick to join him. Draco quietly approves. Justin wouldn’t tolerate Draco’s company, but Reiko is nearly a neutral body in the school despite her Slytherin colors. She also knows when to simply offer silent company instead of inane chatter.

Draco goes over to Hermione. “Budge up, Granger,” he requests while Pansy snags both Patil twins, who are sitting together at the Ravenclaw table. “If you don’t mind, please.”

Hermione obligingly scoots down so that there’s room for Draco to sit without tangling his robes on anything. “Did everything go all right this morning?” she asks.

When Draco looks at her, the expression on Hermione’s face softens into dismay. “Oh. I understand.”

He’s glad he doesn’t need to explain himself. He wouldn’t even know what to say.

When Dumbledore makes the announcement official for the entire school after the mail arrives, Draco pays attention this time. Greg is housed in proper quarters within the Dark Tower, which he thinks is an interesting choice. Draco didn’t realize the tower held anything aside from potentially malicious ghosts and prison cells. Greg is allowed to receive visitors, but only when accompanied by one’s Head of House. Those who try to visit Greg without permission will be spending a great deal of time in Mister Filch’s company.

Hermione reaches beneath the edge of the table to take his hand. “It’ll blow over one day, Draco. In the meantime, Greg’s still safe.”

“Yes.” Draco looks at a table full of food, not sure he wants to eat any of it. “He’s safe.”

The meal is near its end—when did he eat those eggs, anyway?—when Draco feels a tug on his robe sleeve. He turns around to find Dobby regarding him, looking nervous. He also looks ludicrous, but Draco tries very hard to ignore that. “Er…what is it, Dobby?” he asks, trying to make it sound like a request instead of a snapped order.

Maybe he manages it, because Dobby’s sock-clad ears relax a bit. “Dobby is bearing a letter that is meant for Mister Draco Malfoy,” he says, holding out a cream-colored envelope. It’s folded in the old way his mother once showed him, constructed from a solid sheet of paper instead of purchasing it ready-made from a stationery shop. His first and last name is on the front in black ink; the neat printing looks vaguely familiar.

“Who is it from, Dobby?” Draco isn’t about to touch that letter until he knows it’s safe. A Hogwarts house-elf, even an oddball elf like Dobby, would never deliberately harm a student, but he was
raised by a Black. A Black survives long enough to sire children by being appropriately paranoid.

Dobby glances back and forth before he leans in very close to Draco. His whisper is just audible, and Draco can sense a vague muffling spell being applied, as well. “The letter is being from the person who saved Dobby from Mister Malfoy’s father.”

Potter. Potter sent him a letter.

What?

Dobby uses Draco’s bafflement to his advantage and places the envelope in Draco’s hands. “Dobby will be leaving now!”

“Thank you,” Draco responds automatically, but the house-elf has already Disapparated.

Why the hell is Potter sending him a letter?

Draco has no idea he asked that question out loud until Hermione grips his arm and abruptly escorts him from the Great Hall. “You might want to open that somewhere away from prying eyes,” she suggests in a cheerful voice that is, nonetheless, almost as quiet as Dobby’s had been.

“Do you know anything about this?”

Hermione shakes her head. “No, not about anything written to you, but he wrote to me. It’s very, very hush, though,” she murmurs, keeping her eyes forward instead of glancing at McGonagall and Flitwick as they pass by.

They find a quiet alcove on the first storey, one partially hidden by a tapestry. Draco knows this spot is often used for illicit snogging, and wonders if Hermione is aware of that. At least they aren’t actively hiding behind the tapestry. He refuses to sully her reputation.

Or maybe Hermione was counting on the illicit snogging bit to convince everyone else they were up to things that do not involve opening letters from missing Wizarding Saviors. Sometimes she is rather Slytherin like that.

Hermione proves the point by casting Muffliato. “Go ahead. If he wrote to you, considering how things ended last year…” She smiles. “Well, it can’t be that bad.”

Draco winces. The last time he’d seen Potter, it had been at wandpoint. “I’m not certain I agree with that statement.”

He opens the envelope by its tucked flap, marveling over the rich texture of the paper. This is quality work, an expense of paper even his father might pause over before purchasing.

“Hermione. That rumor that Potter is with Professor Salazar’s people…”

“Not such a rumor,” Hermione says, but she isn’t looking at him. She’s smiling while keeping watch, making certain no one bothers them.

That does explain the expensive paper. Draco has seen Potter’s clothing as well as his choices in regards to trunks and school supplies. Potter wouldn’t know quality unless it bit him on the arse, and even then, Draco has doubts.

There is no date on the letter. It has only a basic salutation, closing signature, and a rather crass postscript based on the abbreviation. Quality paper: yes. Lessons in letter-writing: not so much.
To Draco Malfoy,

It’s the weirdest thing, but I think I miss you. That’s really stupid, right? You’d hex my bollocks off if you thought you could get away with it, but you wouldn’t kill me. Maybe you would even laugh if I died, but I don’t think you’d mean it. Not really.

Before you figure out how to dramatically storm away from a piece of paper, hear me out.

I wanted to apologize. Not for everything, mind, because you totally deserved it when Hermione punched you.

I’m sorry that when we first met, I didn’t try harder. I’m sorry I only saw someone who was acting exactly like my aunt, uncle, and cousin, and pretty much ran in the opposite direction like my arse was on fire.

No, calm down. I’m not saying I didn’t try because you reminded me of Muggles. I’m saying I didn’t try harder because you acted like people who’d just spent ten years torturing me.

Oh, that was really difficult to write. Why the hell am I even telling you that? I don’t like saying that to anyone as it is!

But it’s true. They did. Your father treats house-elves better than my family treated me. When you decided to put on your best impersonation of your father, you also put on the best possible impersonation you could ever manage of my aunt and uncle, two people who did their best to teach me how to hate.

I don’t, though. I don’t hate you. Hatred is really tiring, anyway. I don’t even want to be angry anymore.

I might die next month. I think a lot about what things might’ve been like if I’d tried harder every time it mattered, not just some of the time.

I don’t know if you’ll ever see these words, but I’d rather say them somehow, somewhere, than never say it at all.

By the way, why did you attack us on the train ride back to London at the end of fourth year? Tactically, it was a bloody stupid thing to do. You didn’t have anyone guarding your back, and you cornered three people who had already proven to be rabid about defending themselves.

It was Jelly-Legs and the Furnunculus Curse, by the way. Not actually sorry about the tentacles on Crabbe, being that you lot started it, but I thought you’d still like to know.

—Harry Potter

P.S. Totally was supposed to be in Slytherin. Turns out that yes, you really can be more stubborn than an ancient Sorting Hat.

Just picture Ron’s face if I’d let that Hat get away with it.
“Well? What did he say?” Hermione asks.

Draco is still staring at that single sheet of paper with his jaw hanging open. “That mental idiot is apologizing to me!”

Hermione looks surprised. “Are you…insulted?”

“No! He doesn’t owe me—he shouldn’t—” Draco folds the letter so he doesn’t accidentally ball it up with his fist. “He’s mental. This proves it. Not that bit with You-Know-Who and dueling in the cemetery. This is conclusive evidence that Potter is insane.”

Beside him, Hermione covers her mouth to keep a giggle from escaping. “Draco. You knew that.”

“Yes, but…” Draco feels his eyes sting and blinks until the sensation goes away. This is exactly the sort of thing he needed right now just as much as he’d rather Potter had waited. He weeps in private, thank you very much.

“Can I see it?”

Draco nods and hands over the letter. There is nothing there he would keep private from Hermione; most of it she probably knows of already.

Hermione hands it back, a faint smile on her face. “That sounds like Harry.”

“Did his relatives really torture him?” Draco asks, perhaps with too much bluntness. It’s not the sort of question he’s ever been taught how to ask politely, or at all.

Her smile vanishes, replaced by anger that burns deep in her brown eyes. “Yes. Yes, they did.”

“But—he’s the bloody favored savior of the Wizarding World!” Draco bursts out. “Dumbledore just let them?”

Hermione stares at Draco, but says nothing. She doesn’t have to.

Draco feels like he’s been slapped by the realization, it’s so unexpected. Hermione Granger, golden girl of Gryffindor Tower, smartest witch of their year, doesn’t trust Professor Dumbledore.


“What about the others?”

“Who do I trust? Professor Salazar. Professor Slytherin. Professor McGonagall.” Hermione smirks at him. “Professor Snape. Professor Flitwick, given his new war mage title. Professor Sprout is still about in the eighty percent range, but I think she’ll get better. The others I mostly trust to be decent instructors, but I don’t know if I’d trust them with my life.”

“But not Dumbledore.” Draco needs to hear that again. His father would be so vindicated, telling people he’d known all along that Dumbledore couldn’t be trusted, but it isn’t his father’s opinion he cares for.

His mother also doesn’t trust Dumbledore. She just knows better than to shout it from the rafters.
Hermione’s expression is fierce in a way that Draco thinks even Narcissa Malfoy would approve of. “I’m not much fond of anyone who treats my friends like chess pieces instead of people.” She grips his hand. “That includes you, by the way.”

Draco can easily think of a number of times when Dumbledore might have been prodding at him like a chess piece. “I understand. I…” This is foreign territory. It’s his father who did all the plotting, and his mother is acting for Professor Salazar’s Underground. Technically, he could be as well, but he knows Professor Snape would prefer the underage students stay out of it.

“Should we do anything? About Dumbledore, I mean.”

Hermione squeezes Draco’s hand. “Professor Slytherin told me that you can’t simply get rid of everyone who annoys you. You use their good traits to your advantage while doing all you can to neutralize their bad ones. It’s only if they prove to be awful beyond that point that you should do something else about it. I imagine he means killing them, but I’d prefer a trial and imprisonment whenever possible.”

“You would have been a terrifying Slytherin,” Draco compliments her, amazed that Hermione discussed such things without a hint of hesitation. “Is there anything we can do to assist in that neutralization process, then?”

She leans over and kisses his cheek. Draco’s blush is rather annoyingly prompt. “We already are.”
Ash

Chapter Summary

“Are you…are you feeling all right, Nizar?”

“That depends. What’s espresso?”

Chapter Notes

So, I was distracted by Tonks mulling over the side of her family that *isn't* an inbred cesspool and forgot it was Friday. Until it was already Saturday. Whoops. Here's the (late) weekly posting!

“I have been thinking on last night,” Salazar says when he sits next to Nizar at breakfast.

Nizar gives him a bleary look. He has not yet had nearly enough tea to make up for last night’s shenanigans, and is thinking seriously of giving coffee another go. If he adds enough sugar and milk, maybe he won’t taste the compost aspect. Severus made certain Nizar woke on time at seven before departing due to a student knocking at his office door downstairs. “Which part, Sal?”

Salazar responds by casting the Privacy Charm to encircle them and switches to Parseltongue. “You would not remember this, but in your youth, you’d gained enough Mind Magic training to be able to understand the soul shard’s gibbering, as well as sift through its memories. The soul shard was convinced that the basilisk it tortured within the Chamber below the school was male. When you translated for it, it always referred to the basilisk as male.”

“That could just mean that Voldemort is revealing another area of his ignorance,” Nizar counters. “He does have that habit of learning all of what he thinks he needs to know rather than the whole of it.”

“He is also incomprehensibly sexist—misogynist,” Salazar explains when Nizar gives him a blank look over the term sexist. He probably knows what it means, but not until he can think again without drowning himself in tea. “In his mind, only men are capable of great things. Severus once told Voldemort that you’d been the teaching master for my eldest child, and he immediately assumed Fortunata to be a man.”

“Stupid fuck,” Nizar grumbles. Fortunata might have been his first student, but she proved herself to be the most formidable of them all. She bore her mother’s name, but one could never doubt that her father was Deslizarse. “Do you think it ultimately matters?”

“I’d want to know what textbook was in use within this school for identifying magical creatures during Riddle’s tenure here. Otherwise?” Salazar leans back in his chair with a cup of coffee in his hands. “If the textbook is accurate, then it would have been obvious to anyone with eyes that the green serpent in the Chamber was not a true basilisk.”
“Or he just didn’t give a fuck whether it was a birthed basilisk or not, since she could still kill people,” Nizar replies. “With those odd ridges instead of proper horns, nothing would have stopped Tom from marching on with the misogyny.”

“Or, perhaps, she once looked exactly as a proper basilisk should. A magician’s work can only do so much, and basilisks have a magic unique to themselves. Corvinus Gaunt, failing at creating a true basilisk in the manner he thought was proper, would not have wanted that failure to be known.”

Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose and immediately pours fresh tea into a half-full teacup. “An illusion, cast on a basilisk? That wouldn’t work.”

“No, but on a magical construct? I didn’t sense anything that would have impeded such magic from hiding the created basilisk’s true nature.” Salazar sips at his coffee, looking thoughtful. “It’s the diary shade who would have been the least likely to be concerned if he awoke from the pages of that book to find his basilisk looking entirely different. He would have cared only for the Petrification.”

“Have you asked the castle?”

Salazar nods. “I did, which is why I suspect a strong illusion spell that faded over time. In every image Hogwarts showed me of the false basilisk but for her last year of life and the battle that killed her, she was not the green of an African mamba. She still did not have proper horns or a false plume, but the color was right for Jalaf: blue and silver hints of glittering stars over solid black scales. The illusion only failed in regards to Jalaf’s eyes; the serpent Corvinus made had yellow eyes rather than blue.”

“If Jalaf was removed from this castle, regardless of means, by the time of Corvinus Gaunt...” Nizar sighs. They really have enough to concern themselves with, and now there is the probable addition of basilisk theft. “Corvinus must have known enough of Jalaf’s appearance to cast the illusion when his magical construct failed to resemble the real thing, but the only way he would know how that is if an ancestor of his had informed him—or it was his trickery that removed Jalaf from the castle.”

“I don’t know whose trickery it would be.” Salazar is trying hard to control his expression, but Nizar always knows when his brother is frustrated. “When I ask Hogwarts to show me Jalaf, she will do so. He remained a bit on the small side for an adult basilisk, and his plume was more violet rather than the traditional scarlet, but I’ve no doubt that it was him.

“When I ask Hogewáþ to show me when Jalaf was taken from this castle, she shows me nothing except an empty Chamber, one that had yet to be altered by Corvinus Gaunt.”

Nizar stares at him. That does tell them that Corvinus was likely not the cause of Jalaf’s disappearance, but the rest... “Salazar, you’re one of her Founders! Why would she not show you?”

Salazar shakes his head. “I don’t know, but it isn’t any sort of corruption that causes her lack of answer. I strongly feel as if she has her own reasons for stymying me, but she won’t share those, either.”

“Bugger.” Nizar might still feel awful by evening, but makes the offer regardless. “Do you wish for me to accompany you to Wales this evening?”

“No. I’d welcome the company, but the nest in Wales is used to me. We’d need to introduce you to them, and I’d rather it be a short trip rather than hours of curiosity. I’ll take you to meet them at a later date.”
Or make me seek them out on my own, Nizar thinks sourly. Salazar is trying not to be so obtuse in his belief that he is going to die with Voldemort’s defeat, but some things don’t need to be spoken of to be obvious. “Then instead I’ll ask why we’re using Parseltongue with a Privacy Charm. Ron Weasley might be proving himself proficient, but I doubt he’d hear us over the noise in this Hall.”

Salazar picks up a triangle-sliced bit of toast and regards it as if it’s a puzzle piece. “I am beginning to think that Albus Dumbledore understands Parseltongue.”

Nizar does his best not to immediately bend his fork in half. “How in the fuck would he manage that?”

Salazar shrugs. “Mister Weasley certainly stands as a gingery example that the language can be learned.”

“Yes, but—” Nizar tries not to plaster both hands over his face. No more difficulties, gods, please! “How many conversations have we had around Dumbledore which were spoken in Parseltongue?”

“Too many, but not the sort that would make him think we wished him ill. Certainly enough to convince him that we’re displeased with his behavior, though.”

“There is that, yes.” Dumbledore has been rather blunt about confronting Nizar’s dislike of the man, but has also done his best recently to prove himself a good person—if one were easily convinced by political motives, anyway. He stands by his thoughts that Dumbledore is—for now—a decent Headmaster, but not someone he’ll ever wish to invite into his home for a drink. He’ll continue to tolerate the annoying prick if Dumbledore rekindles his reputation in a way that grants them the means to hire the additional staff Hogwarts needs to thrive. “All right. More caution is warranted, then, but that would be a wise idea, regardless. Fuck, but I don’t want to face my classes this morning.”

“You certainly sound out-of-sorts enough to have been successful in repairing your link to the castle,” Salazar comments with an amused smile. “Is it a certainty?”

Nizar smiles. “If I concentrate, I can sense every single part of this castle—and she is a lot bigger than she used to be.” Much like the difficulty with regaining his full sense of Britain, Nizar hadn’t been conscious of the lack until he had it all back again.

Salazar abruptly switches back to English. “That she is. Trinitus, darling?” He waits for the house-elf to appear next to their chairs. The former Bulstrode elf has taken to Roman gowns and bejeweled ears with a vengeance. “Vedi se qualcuno in cucina sa come preparare un Gran Caffé Speciale romano con una quantità di zucchero che mio fratello considererebbe normalmente offensivo.”

“Medieval Latin?” Nizar asks in confusion after Trinitus nods and departs. He understood perhaps one-third of that.

“No, that was modern Italiano,” Salazar replies. “The drink might not be to your taste, but you’ll certainly be awake for the rest of the morning.”

“I hate coffee, bastardo.”

“Don’t worry.” Salazar pats his arm. “You’ll become civilized eventually.”

Nizar doesn’t consider that to be worthy of a response unless there is hexing involved.

Fuck. It’s too early for that, too.
Severus arrives in time to have a cup of tea, possibly inhale something on the table, and collect his mail. “Good morning, Severus.”

“Good morning,” Severus replies, scowling at a flyer that looks like a garish invitation to waste money on shit potions ingredients. “Can I ask you something?” he asks after Banishing the flyer.

“It’s early,” Nizar finds himself whinging. At least the Privacy Charm is still active.

“Oh, that’s auspicious.” Severus smirks like a smug bastard who didn’t fuck with a Founding Stone last night. “I found myself dwelling on the Sheep’s Clothing Hex after convincing a first-year that acting the part of a sheep was not a wise idea. Why didn’t it reveal the Pictish tattoos?”

“Because Gedeloc had time to come to know my brother very well,” Salazar replies before Nizar can think of an answer.

“Yes. That. They’re Pictish and they’re magic. They may well have laughed off the magic of that hex.”

“Or perhaps Gedeloc understood your need to keep things to yourself, and made certain the only one who would ever have control over the appearance of those tattoos was yourself,” Salazar says.

“That’s the same thing that I just said.”

Salazar rolls his eyes. “It is not!”

“It still answers my question, regardless.” Severus smirks again and returns to his mail. A great deal of it seems to be carefully packed and shrunken potions supplies, sent by owl in padded boxes, all of them stamped with the seal of an apothecary in Diagon Alley. Severus only looks up from that task when Trinitus arrives to hand Nizar a tall mug full of steaming liquid. It smells like coffee, but also sweetener, dairy, and perhaps something else, as well, which makes it far more palatable than Salazar’s black compost coffee.

“What is that?” Severus asks.

Nizar peers down at the liquid. It’s definitely been made with double cream, not the more typical milk used for coffee and tea. “I don’t know, but I’m probably drinking it so I can function today.”

Severus gives Salazar a suspicious look. “Are you giving him bloody espresso?”

Salazar nods. “A double, in fact.”

Nizar has no idea what that means, but he doesn’t hate what he’s drinking. There is enough cream and sugar to hide most of the coffee taste, which is less compost and more like a fragrant roasted hazelnut just riding the edge of bitterness. The elves flavored it, perhaps, or maybe there are better variants of the coffee bean available than the swill Salazar insists upon drinking.

“You cruel bastard.” Severus sounds bemused, or maybe appalled. “Most of those students don’t deserve what you’re about to inflict on them via your brother.”

“Should I keep drinking this?” Nizar asks.

Severus and Salazar both respond with a firm, “Yes,” which does nothing to stop Nizar from being concerned.

Oh, well. His first class is with the fifth-years. They’ll live.
Most of Nizar’s fifth-years—and one of his two fourth-years—arrive promptly at eight o’clock for class. The Slytherins and Gryffindors only have their Defence book, a spare quill, and a scroll, as their bookbags are still awaiting redistribution. No one looks to be in the best of spirits, especially after Dumbledore announced Goyle’s new home in the Dark Tower. The Slytherins are doing their best to keep up a strong façade, but he’s known them all for years now. They might fool the other students, but Nizar knows how they really feel.

Nizar regards Goyle’s empty seat before temporarily Vanishing it until it’s needed for his next class. He should have asked Severus how it went that morning in the Common Room, but his mind was on Dumbledore, basilisks, and trying to comprehend wakefulness.

Besides, if he had been present, he might have not been able to keep silent. He’s still too fucking angry that Goyle tried to—he knows Greg has never been highly intelligent. He can easily believe Greg could be fooled into treating Gryffindors and so-called Blood Traitors as the enemy. Nizar truly did not think the young idiot would ever veer into outright maliciousness against his own Head of House, no matter how his parents goaded him in the letters they sent to their eldest son.

Salazar refuses to let Nizar read those letters. That is…probably for the best.

“Good morning,” Nizar greets them once his stragglers arrive. Dunbar and Draco find the last open desks in the middle of the room. Draco looks baffled, which is interesting. His was a letter Nizar knew he had to review before he dared send it to its intended recipient, but that isn’t the sort of response he thought it might evoke.

“Before we begin, if anyone needs to speak of Mister Goyle’s in-school banishment, now is the time.”

“Most of us have done our talking already,” Boot says, and turns around in his desk. “We just wanted to make sure you lot were all right.”

Draco, Blaise, Millicent, Pansy, Theo, Richard, and Daphne do an excellent job of trying to hide their surprise. Millicent has the most success, but her default state is often nonchalant pragmatism. “We’re…we’re fine. Thank you,” Daphne finally says on their behalf. The others nod, but Pansy and Daphne are treating Boot to further speculative looks. Given Daphne Greengrass’s intentions to find her own spouse, and Pansy still having a tendency towards fickleness, Nizar suspects matchmaking thoughts are in progress.

Or maybe they both have someone else in mind. That wouldn’t be much of a surprise, either.

Nizar glances at the other Slytherins who have chosen to sit apart from their housemates. Vincent Crabbe is slumped down in his seat, scowling, but that has always been his default expression for emotion aside from vacant staring. He hopes Vince isn’t planning yet more maliciousness. He’d very much like for someone in the Goyle and Crabbe families to realize that following Voldemort is a stupid idea.

Tracey Davis is much easier to read. She loathes Nizar, hates this class and her required participation, and despises everyone in the room who isn’t Crabbe, Miss Thatcher, Hopkins, Miss Blishwick, Miss Dunbar, Miss Turpin, and Corner.
It’s becoming obvious that Miss Davis doesn’t like Lavender Brown. Interesting. Miss Davis’s blunt political beliefs seem to have ended what was otherwise a decent romantic relationship between herself and Vaisey, as well.

“Anyone else?” Nizar asks.

“Most of us just think Goyle’s lucky that the Ministry won’t lock up underage wizards, else he’d already be in Azkaban, sir,” Miss Weasley finally says. “And, uh—the Slytherins might have mentioned that you—portrait-you, anyway—told them that seventeen-year-olds make mistakes. If they can blunder, then fifteen-year-olds can make some real stupid decisions, too.”

Nizar smiles. Black was sixteen when he tried to murder a student via werewolf, but the idea holds true. “They can, yes. Also, over my dead body will anyone aside from Voldemort ever see Azkaban ever again, but we’ll discuss the politics of that situation later. First, I have some belongings to return to everyone who attended last Friday’s eventful Potions double.”

The Gryffindors and Slytherins, even the irritable ones, all perk up in relief when Nizar begins levitating bookbags to their respective owners. “Oh, thank bloody Merlin,” Longbottom says as he grabs his bag out of the air. “My wand is in here! I’ve been panicking about that all weekend.”

“Oh, sir?” Parvati Patil asks as she snags her bookbag.

“Because the whole of what was lying on top of them wasn’t properly removed until yesterday evening,” Nizar answers. “The elves cleaned them off for you after the rubble was dealt with. Given how late it was when the task was done, they stopped by this morning and asked me to return them to you.” He barely remembers the request, but the pile of bookbags behind his desk served as an excellent reminder.

Nizar is eying the last bookbag, thinking of calling for an elf to deliver it to Miss Granger, when Longbottom lets out an unexpected, pained gasp. He turns around quickly, on the verge of drawing his wand, before realizing the lack of danger.

Espresso makes him twitchy. Good to know.

Longbottom has drawn his wand out of his bag and is staring at it in stunned dismay. The wood is snapped in half with sharp, splintered edges. The dragon heartstring core severed with it, and hangs limply from both ends. Longbottom’s right hand is bleeding from where he grasped it by those jagged edges.

Nizar heals Longbottom’s hand with a gentle nudge to the classroom’s integrated magic, though he doubts the young man notices. Then he glances down at Longbottom’s bookbag, which is older than that of his classmates. The same charms that protected everyone else’s contents, except for what fell out, are not attached to Neville’s bag, not even the common Extending Charm.

“Rotten luck, mate,” Finnigan says to Longbottom, a sentiment echoed by many. A number of Nizar’s students are clutching their wands, as if fearful that something will come along and snap them at any moment.

“ Enemies I stand between and my wand, Mister Longbottom.”

Longbottom blinks a few times and looks at Nizar. “It was my dad’s. Gran said I should use it so I’d be the same sort of great wizard he was. She’s going to be so angry with me!”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. That explains so much about how Neville’s magic and that wand have interacted in Nizar’s presence. It isn’t a matched set, but a forced pairing, and likely the father in
question wasn’t available to introduce his son to the wand properly. “If she is angry with you for an event not of your doing, then the fault most certainly does not lie with you,” he says to Longbottom, who flushes a dull red.

Augusta Longbottom’s forced expectations explain the state of Longbottom’s bookbag, as well. If Longbottom’s grandmother forced a wand on him, then that bag also belonged to a parent. The protective charms were either not applied when it was first purchased, or not renewed properly. Nizar might have Pure-blood students whose bags come from places other than Madam Malkin’s, but at least their parents made certain the proper charms were applied.

“I can’t get another wand until Easter Break,” Longbottom is saying in a desolate whisper. “What’m I going to do for a week? I’ll fail everything!”

“Not everything requires a wand, Mister Longbottom, and—” Nizar breaks off. “Excuse me for a moment. Don’t blow anything up while I’m gone.”

He Apparates directly to the storage room. He throws open the trunk lid and finds what he’s looking for at once: a rectangular box that once held treasures retrieved from a chest hidden on the bottom of the Black Lake. Rowena’s quill is on his desk; Helga’s knife is in his boot. Aside from the letters, the only thing left that it holds is Godric’s last gift.

Nizar holds the wand in his hand, prodding at his own memories. Godric properly introduced it to him—Godric might have been the one to give him that particular lesson in the first place. With that recognition in place, he can introduce it to another.

He returns to the classroom to find most of the Slytherins, Hufflepuffs, and Ravenclaws surrounding Neville’s desk to get a closer look at the broken wand. Nizar doesn’t blame them their curiosity. It’s likely the first up-close glimpse of a broken wand many of those outside of Gryffindor House have ever seen.

“Mister Longbottom.”

Longbottom glances up and goes wide-eyed when he sees what Nizar is holding. “What’s that?”

“Aside from the obvious,” Weasley says, but he’s commiserating with Longbottom, not mocking him. Weasley’s broken wand is the reason Gilderoy Lockhart is no longer inflicting Wizarding Britain with his odious presence. If anyone understands how Neville Longbottom feels in this moment, it’s Ron Weasley.

“I have two spare wands in my possession,” Nizar explains. “One of them most certainly wouldn’t suit you. It’s the wrong sort of wood for someone with your magical talents.” Neville flushes a darker red at the praise.

It’s also the sort of wand that everyone in this bloody year would recognize. Nizar is not in the mood to come up with explanations as to why he has that child’s wand.

Nizar holds the wand out to Neville, handle-first. “If you’re going to introduce a magician to a wand that is technically your possession, there is a specific way to go about doing it. Grasp the wand handle, but don’t try to take it from my hand yet.”

“You’re letting me borrow a wand?” Longbottom asks in bewilderment.

It’s difficult not to scowl. “As any teacher in this school should do the moment a student has a difficulty with such an important aspect of their magical education? Yes, I most certainly am. Granted, I suspect this will not be a borrowing at all.”
“Well, that would have been grand three years ago,” Weasley mutters under his breath.

Millicent waits a full minute before she uses both hands to shove Longbottom into wand-grabbing range. “Stop being daft and do what Professor Slytherin says!”

“O-okay.” Longbottom swallows and reaches out, wrapping his long fingers around the wand’s furled bird’s wing handle. It’s a good thing Godric was bloody tall, because Longbottom is well on his way to competing with Godric for size. “Now what?”

“Now, everyone listens, yourself included.” Nizar lets his gaze sweep over his cluster of students. “This can be done between any set of magicians as long as they’re both willing, and it’s most certainly a lesson you should know. I’ve already given this particular lesson to your N.E.W.T.-level peers, but current circumstances mean you will learn it, too. All of you know that you can pick up almost any wand and cast a spell with it if you’re learned enough, but the results will never be powerful until wand and magician adjust to their new relationship. Are you with me so far?”

“First-years know that, sir,” Miss Davis says in a rude drawl.

Nizar decides it’s best to just ignore her, else he might hex her. “In times of war, or simpler moments of danger, you can introduce your wand to a fellow magician, and vice versa. If one of you loses a wand, or events come about that a trade becomes necessary by insane circumstance, you or your partner will be able to cast spells far more easily with the different wand than would normally be possible. The wand already knows you, so that adjustment period you’re all familiar with would not exist.”

“Have you done that?” Miss Jones asks.

“Absolutely I have. Salazar and I can use each other’s wands easily, and not because they’re twins. Severus and I can do the same. Minerva is pondering the notion; Filius cannot share with anyone else because his wand is more suited to the goblin part of his heritage rather than the human half. It would bite,” Nizar adds, which earns a few half-hearted smiles. “Auror Tonks, Sir Lupin, and His Grace the Lord Black share a household, and thus share similar dangers, so they have all exchanged greetings with each other’s wands—and you’re all going to pretend I did not say something so easily interpreted as puerile.”

Zabini, Vaisey, Finnigan, and Macmillan are the worst offenders, but at least they get over themselves quickly enough. “Now. If this were a paired introduction, Neville would be holding out a wand in his dominant hand, handle first, and I would be grasping it in mirror to this—please remove your minds from the sewers for three entire minutes,” Nizar begs when there is a fresh round of giggling. “I’m a thousand years old, and I’ve heard all of it before.”

“How do you introduce a wand, then, aside from the grasping?” Miss Parkinson asks, making the innuendo deliberate.

“Please do not incite me into desiring to use the stupid points system,” Nizar says. The resulting quiet is much better. “To introduce your wand to another, you have merely to describe it to them, so here is what I know: this is scarlet-veined ash, thirteen inches long, and though it appears inflexible, this wand will not easily shatter. It was a gift from a magical doorway to the magician who carved it. No trained wandmaker ever worked this wood, though several have studied it, including Bernier Ollivander. It was held by one man until he decided it was time to put it aside and focus on other parts of his life and magic, whereupon he gifted it to me. Ash followed that particular magician’s bloodline on his father’s side, something I’m fairly certain still holds true today. The core of this wand is unknown, given that its owner never desired to break it in half just to find out.” He pauses. “Rowena and Helga never knew what the cores of their wands were made from, either. The
wandmaker who crafted Rowena’s wand wouldn’t speak of it, while Helga was granted her wand by means of the original branch falling out of a tree to land on her annoying elder brother’s head.”

Longbottom gets it first, but then, he’s the one holding the wand. “YOU CAN’T GIVE ME GODRIC GRYFFINDOR’S WAND!”

Nizar grins and lets go of the wand. “What? I couldn’t hear you. Someone was busy shouting out something ridiculous.”

“Whoa.” The students are all but crushing Longbottom now in their attempt to get a closer look. Even the Baby Death Eaters are interested, though they’re trying hard to pretend otherwise. “That’s really Godric’s wand?”

“It truly is. Helga left me her favorite knife, but that was very like her. Oh, and I’ve been grading your essays with Rowena’s favorite quill from the start,” Nizar adds, his grin widening when far too many faces turn interesting colors. “You’ve been hanging about with my brother and myself for months now. This should not still be such a shock.”

“But—but—” Longbottom gives him a pleading look. “Please take it back! I’ll cope for the week, I promise!”

“I will do no such thing unless you can prove it does nothing for you at all.” Nizar crosses his arms. “Go on. Try it out. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Longbottom blinks a few times in alarm. “Given last week’s bit with the floor? I could blow a hole in the wall!”

“Good point. I strongly suggest no student be standing in the way of Mister Longbottom’s wand,” Nizar says dryly. That clears a near-immediate path, though no one ventures very far. “Neville. Sometime this morning would be excellent.”

Longbottom squeezes his eyes shut, turns his head away from the wand, and shakes it in the direction of the wall. Nizar was expecting a spell, and has no idea what that shaking is about, but the smooth length of the wand immediately takes on a solid scarlet glow. Not scarlet overlying another magician’s magic—that is a perfect match, and bloodline recognition besides.

“Excellent,” Nizar declares, which prompts Longbottom to open his eyes and gaze at the wand in disbelief. “Congratulations; you’ve a new wand.”

“It’s—it’s supposed to do that?” Longbottom stutters. “I mean—I only ever got sparks with my dad’s wand, and Gran considered that good enough—”

“Mister Longbottom, forgive my bluntness, but it sounds very much as if your grandmother is doing her best to turn you into someone you were never meant to be.” Longbottom stares at him, mouth hanging open in shock, but he doesn’t disagree.

“You just—you gave Godric Gryffindor’s wand to Longbottom? Bloody Neville useless Longbottom?” Miss Blishwick shrieks.

“Actually, that wand hasn’t belonged to Godric Grypusdor since he deliberately placed it inside a box in the year 1039, with the intent that it be passed along to the one best suited to it.” Nizar stares at her, unblinking, until Miss Blishwick turns her head away in anger. “The Longbottom family, like several other magical families in Britain, are among Godric’s direct descendants. How many ash wands are in your family?” Nizar asks the Weasleys.
“About half of us,” Ron answers before Ginny can. “Including my wand, sir.”

“The Prewetts, too,” Ginny says. “Aunt Muriel says it’s rare for a Prewett not to get one.”

That says quite a bit about Mafalda Prewett, given that her wand is decidedly not made of ash. Young idiot; Nizar still hopes she’ll outgrow her current bout of stupidity. “The same can be said of many others.”

Nizar turns back to Miss Blishwick. “You now have a weekend detention to serve for defaming and insulting a fellow student and magician without cause.”

“Longbottom doesn’t deserve that wand!” Hopkins bursts out.

“Oh, so none of you actually believe that the wand chooses the magician, as wandmakers have been claiming for thousands of years?” Nizar rolls his eyes. “You can’t fake a perfect pairing when it comes to a magician’s magic and a wand, you daft idiot. You’re joining Miss Blishwick in detention, by the way. I do hope you enjoy it, considering your schedule is already booked near-solid with detentions as it is.”

Hopkins turns bright scarlet and kicks at a desk before finding his seat. “Yes, please, everyone sit down. You can marvel over Longbottom having a proper wand later, but for now…” Nizar smiles. “You’d best take notes quickly, because your History professor introduced me to espresso this morning.”

“Shit, our hands are going to fall off,” Miss Jones moans under her breath at the same time that Pansy whispers, “What the hell is espresso?”

Nizar decides he was briefly and conveniently deaf when those words were spoken. “Now: let’s talk about the differences between constructs of magical creatures and the magical creatures they’re attempting to imitate. The most important thing to know is that magical constructs of living creatures, especially sentient ones, are almost always dangerous…”

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“Dobby stopped by long enough to tell me you had my bookbag,” Hermione gasps out as she bolts into the room. The fifth-years are all gone; the fourth-years have yet to arrive.

Nizar picks up the bag in question. “Right here. I was going to have the elves return it to you, but then I got a bit distracted, things happened, I gave Longbottom a new wand—it’s been quite a morning.”

Hermione accepts her bag and then peers at him, frowning. “Are you…are you feeling all right, Nizar?”

“That depends. What’s espresso?” Nizar asks.

Hermione’s eyes widen. “Who gave you that?” she asks in alarm.

“Salazar. It’s sort of buzzy. Like being magically high without actually being magically high.”

Hermione sighs. “I’m so glad that I don’t have your class until after lunch. It’ll have worn off by
then.”

“Yes, but what is it?” Nizar repeats plaintively.


“He said something about a double.”

Hermione reaches out and pats him on the arm. “Just be ready to guzzle tea when the caffeine crash hits, and you’ll be fine.”

“When the what?”

Hermione is already retreating. “Sorry, I have to get to my next class! Good luck, Professor Slytherin!”

“Yay. Fuck.” Nizar wriggles his fingers and resists the urge to climb the nearest wall. “Salazar, you complete prick.”

His fourth-years don’t stand a chance.

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The only thing Severus wanted out of Monday was for his classroom to have bloody chairs again when he arrived. Fortunately, the house-elves provided exactly what was needed. It truly makes Severus wonder how long the entire bloody castle was using the Rubbish Room aspect as an easy way to get rid of unwanted items. The chairs are about one hundred fifty years old, but perfectly preserved, made of solid oak that tends not to react to cauldron spills unless that reaction is to melt entirely. He didn’t think there would be this many matching oak chairs in the Rubbish Room, which means the elves decided to alter them until they were uniform in appearance.

Justin Finch-Fletchley’s first appearance in Severus’s Potions class that week is surprisingly on schedule. He arrives just before nine o’clock on Monday morning, setting up at a workbench with Megan Jones rather than his usual partner in Wayne Hopkins.

Severus eyes the new arrangement out of the corner of his eye, but is not really surprised when Lisa Turpin takes a place next to Hopkins. Finch-Fletchley was far more forgiving before his family’s funerals, but with Hopkins still acting the part of a Baby Death Eater, that friendship was bound to disintegrate.

It’s uncomfortable to realize how much the current situation reminds him of how his friendship with Lily fell apart, and he isn’t certain Hopkins or Miss Turpin have the capacity for learning their lesson. The Hufflepuffs in the last war who chose to be Death Eaters had no difficulty applying that House’s famous, fierce, and tenacious loyalty to Voldemort.

This week was originally meant to be devoted to more serious work, lessons that would continue to lay the groundwork for the Potions O.W.L. at the end of term. Instead, Severus selected something that might almost qualify as light-hearted. There are still useful things to learn from it, even if the potion itself is not on the O.W.L. “Today we are going to be discussing the ingredients, and the aspects of those ingredients, that lead to the brewing of a successful Aging Potion.”
“You mean the one the Weasley twins used last year, sir, or the one that Professor Flitwick accidentally inverted his age with?” Miss Li asks after he acknowledges her raised hand.

“They were both the very same potion. The unfortunate and permanent age reversal in Professor Flitwick’s case was due to a lack of research in regards as to what some of those magical ingredients could do to goblin physiology.” Severus pauses. “Granted, after the initial shock wore off, your Charms teacher doesn’t consider it to be an unfortunate event at all, merely a thoughtless blunder.” He chooses not to mention that he’s seen at least three Gringotts goblins who decided to replicate the blunder. He said nothing to the goblins, but recognized them by their voices and unchanged mannerisms.

“What other potions will affect a goblin differently than a human, sir?” Miss Abbott asks.

“A fair number of them. Wiggenweld Potion is an odd exception, but will only work on anyone with goblin blood when the potion is used as the cure for the Draught of Living Death. No one is certain why it is an exception. I suspect bowtruckles to be the culprit, but there is nothing yet to prove that suspicion.”

“But—bowtruckles aren’t part of a Wiggenweld potion. Right, sir?” Goldstein asks.

“I see some of you have done your reading,” Severus murmurs, pleased. “No, they are not, but a wiggenweld tree is a favorite haunt of bowtruckles. The fresh bark of a wiggenweld tree is used in the potion. Therefore, it’s possible that the presence of bowtruckles alters the nature of the bark, and that is why goblins can use it. However, we’re digressing.”

Severus turns and flicks his wand at the replaced blackboard, which is even more archaic in appearance than the previous one. He isn’t certain he likes it, but it will do for now. The list of ingredients for the Aging Potion appears in white chalk. “Write down each of these ingredients. We’ll discuss them during the hour we have, but if we do not finish, I expect you to research the remainder before your brewing Double on Wednesday afternoon.”

Finch-Fletchley continues to participate in the lesson without hesitation. He does not ask questions, but he is paying rapt attention and taking diligent notes. Severus keeps a watchful eye on him, thinking that Poppy and Nizar called it correctly. Finch-Fletchley is going to throw himself into his studies like a fool intent on impaling themselves. Severus understands the impulse, having often succumbed to the desire to bury himself in schooling, but it means that the Hufflepuff will bear careful watching as the term progresses. If Finch-Fletchley doesn’t sleep properly while trying to find oblivion in academia, the chance of an accident in this classroom increases.

With his first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins in the next hour, he hears the first rumors that Neville Longbottom’s wand broke during last Friday’s debacle. It was in his bookbag, a proper place to store a wand when not needed for any aspect of brewing, but the bookbag had no charms on it to protect its contents.

*Dammit, Augusta,* Severus things in angry resignation. He recognized Longbottom’s bag, of course. It belonged to Alice Max, distinguishable by a specific and outdated Gryffindor patch sewn onto the outer flap. It is one thing to give a child hand-me-downs from their parents, but quite another not to renew their necessary charms.

He’s almost glad that Longbottom’s wand is broken. Alice Max-Longbottom’s wand was lost during her last battle against Death Eaters, and that leaves Augusta with no choice but to take her grandson to a wandmaker. She should have done so in August of 1991. Severus wonders if he can convince her to choose someone who is not Ollivander, but it’s doubtful.
His third-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs are the ones who enter with the rumor—almost certain fact—that Longbottom already has a new wand. Severus listens while pretending to be busy with redistributing their last homework assignment; the new wand is said to be a perfect match for Longbottom. That’s rare for a wand that someone just happened to have lying around—

Severus turns away from his class so he can squeeze his eyes shut in frustration. Nizar has two spare wands, but he is not fool enough to hand over the child’s. That leaves only one option.

Neville Longbottom is now swanning about with Godric bloody Gryffindor’s wand.

“Why?” he asks Nizar at lunch, not even making it to the table before the word emerges from between Severus’s clenched teeth.

Nizar pauses in the midst of grabbing the teapot before Minerva makes off with it. “What? Why which what thing? It’s been quite the morning.”

“That. Wand.”

Salazar glares at Nizar, an unexpected mirror of Severus’s current temper. “I saw it during my ten o’clock History lecture. It was quite the startling sight, given my brother hadn’t seen fit to warn me.”


“I congratulated him on the fine match, and then spent the rest of the hour trying not to weep in front of a group of confused teenagers.” Salazar sighs. “Pendejo jerkoff.”

“He needed a wand. I gave him one. Problem bloody solved!” Nizar retorts in irritation.

“You gave him the wand of his House Founder,” Aurora hisses. “You’ve caused such a stir that I’ve no idea what the results will be!”

“If you’re referring to jealousy? Most of them understand that to be a foolish idea,” Nizar counters, frowning. “They learned that particular lesson from watching what happened to that child for four years. Being famous is not enjoyable.”

“They’re all far more interested in what it’s capable of,” Filius pipes up, all but squeaking in excitement. “I have to admit, I spent half the class trying various charms in an attempt to determine the wand core!”

“Good luck with that. No one else ever succeeded,” Salazar says in wry humor. “If the Door wouldn’t even tell Godric, it certainly won’t tell someone who doesn’t even hold ownership of the wand.”

“True, but—curiosity, Salazar! I had to try,” Filius insists in a cheerful voice.

“I’ll not be pleased until I see if it does anything to improve Mister Longbottom’s ability to successfully Transfigure an object. Any object,” Minerva growls. “Until then, I don’t care if that wand came from God himself—I just want magical success in my classroom!”

Dumbledore has spent their entire conversation watching the Gryffindor table, where a red-faced Longbottom is trying to fend off questions and eat without choking on his own lunch. The Gryffindor Prefects are attempting to keep the curious at bay, but it isn’t working very well, especially as they are just as keen to get a glimpse of the new wand. “That is truly Godric Gryffindor’s wand. You’re not in jest.”
Nizar pauses in the middle of shoving butter into a baked potato. “Yes. He left it for me, most likely with the intention that I pass it on to whoever was meant to hold it next. That I happened to find that person today was due to a culmination of events which were not of my making.”

“I just…” Dumbledore sighs. “I suppose I find it interesting that Godric Gryffindor’s wand suits most the child who could also have been the subject of the prophecy against the Dark Lord.”

*That is true, but you are also insanely jealous,* Severus thinks snidely. If Dumbledore had known that wand still existed, he would have done his best to cajole Nizar into letting him “borrow” the wand, much as he once borrowed an Invisibility Cloak from James Potter.

Severus is not a fool. He has no idea when the borrowing was done, but that Dumbledore kept the Cloak speaks volumes. Dumbledore had no intention of sending it back to the Potters until the prophecy was fulfilled. It then became a convenient Christmas gift meant to help the child see Dumbledore as a benevolent and helpful figure.

Fortunately for them all, Dumbledore’s plans backfired rather spectacularly in that regard.

“Prophecy?” Pomona repeats, raising both eyebrows in blatant query.

“Yes.” Dumbledore’s shoulders lower. “It has been discussed among those in the Order of the Phoenix, though we’ve only spoken on what the Dark Lord already knows. Harry was targeted by Voldemort due to a prophecy, though he only knows half of it. He fears what the rest of that prophecy might mean for him.”

“If the prophecy has already been…well, half-way fulfilled, why is it still such a secret?” Pomona asks, frowning.

“It is much less a secret now than it was,” Dumbledore says, “and we are, perhaps, attempting to lay bait.”

“Bait.” Pomona nods. “Then I’ll say no more.”

“I’ll decide on my opinion of Mister Longbottom’s new wand after three o’clock today,” Minerva says, interrupting whatever odd (and manipulative) tangent Dumbledore was aiming for. “And…” Her voice softens. “If someone had placed Godric Gryffindor’s wand into my hands and said it must be passed to one of my Gryffindors this very day, Neville is among the first I would consider.”

Severus does his best not to spit out his own tea. He is long practiced at not showing surprise, but that nearly did him in. “Good God, why?”

Minerva’s chin lowers as she looks at him, as if observing him over the rims of her lacking spectacles. That habit still is not quite lost, then. “Most of my students already have wands that suit them perfectly, especially after Mister Weasley was able to be matched to a proper wand instead of the one that splintered and broke in his second year. Miss Weasley’s temper is too sharp. Miss Mirfield is too timid. Miss Bell is a bit too fond of violence. Mister Mohammad is far too excitable, and Dennis far too young to receive a wand meant for defence. Miss Jugson, possibly, had she been old enough; the same could be said of Mister Peakes. But otherwise? Mister Longbottom is, above all things, kind. That should be the defining factor to consider when passing on the wand of a Defence Master.”

“War Master,” Nizar corrects in a soft voice. “But you’re correct. They all had the potential, but Mister Longbottom is the one meant to hold it. Maybe he’ll be the last owner it has, maybe not, but for now…”
Pomona is the one to lean down the table, voicing her concern. “He’s too young for battle, Nizar.”

Nizar nods his agreement. “Most of them are, Pomona, but I doubt Voldemort or his Death Eaters will be concerned with such things.”

That seems to settle Pomona. “How was Justin in your class, Severus?”

“Devoted,” Severus answers her. “In a way that could speak well of his intentions, or it could see him in the hospital wing from exhaustion.”


Minerva’s expression goes tight with displeasure. “It’s a possibility, yes.”

The student reactions regarding Longbottom’s gifted ancient wand seem to match Nizar’s predictions. Severus hears far more conversations among students who want a close look at the wand, to see it and study it—not take it, which is a bit of a surprise. Overenthusiastic academia is ruling the day. The jealousy comes from the sources he knew would be trouble: their blasted Baby Death Eaters.

The Marked students, by contrast, are quiet. Most of them are eying Longbottom in speculation. It’s not a plot for an attack; Severus would recognize that at once. These are students who are reevaluating Neville Longbottom’s standing in their Pure-blooded world. Longbottom is walking around with proof that he is well-connected to a House Founder, and that is not a connection a maturing Pure-blood will easily dismiss.

“I’m convinced,” Minerva says as they sit down to dinner in the Great Hall. The Great Wand Debate is still in full swing, especially among the Ravenclaws, but most students are fickle creatures. The first of many are already moving on, ready for the next big controversy to capture their attention.

“How so?” Dumbledore asks politely. Severus resists a sudden urge to stab his employer. Dumbledore has been well-behaved and amiable about all the changes happening in Wizarding Britain, but Severus doesn’t trust it. He has no proof whatsoever that it is nothing more than a façade, but he is instinctively wary.

“His Transfiguration is already improved now that Mister Longbottom has a wand to match his talents,” Minerva says. “I don’t think he will ever be the sort of student welcome in my N.E.W.T. classes, but I’m now far less concerned about his O.W.L.s. As Longbottom gains more successes to overcome the memory of all those failures, he’ll gain confidence, and that is part of what makes a good wizard.”

“If his grandmother raises a fuss, I’ll be so happy to educate her,” Nizar mutters.

Severus glares at him. “Do not start a war with bloody Augusta Longbottom! I do not need to see Augusta and her hideous vulture hat within these halls.”

“It wouldn’t be a war,” Nizar protests, but he doesn’t say anything else about antagonizing Longbottom’s grandmother. Severus doesn’t trust that silence, either, but at least if Nizar tears Augusta Longbottom a new one, it will be for a good cause.

“I wonder if Mister Longbottom would allow me to study his wand,” Dumbledore says. Severus gives Nizar a firm nudge with his elbow when he sees Nizar’s grip on his knife go white-knuckled. Apparently, he is not the only one in a bloody mood.

“Mister Longbottom hasn’t even held the wand for twenty-four hours yet. Give him some time to
acclimate properly,” Salazar suggests, and fortunately, that is the end of Dumbledore’s musings about Godric’s wand for the evening.

Dumbledore would be wise to restrain himself. The man already holds the fucking Elder Wand. He does not need to be clutching at any other ancient and powerful relics.

_Façade_, Severus thinks, and wonders what the hell else Dumbledore is hiding from them.
All Severus wanted was to purchase laboratory-quality glassware on Tuesday afternoon, but Tuesday as a whole decides to be a complete pain in the arse.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Note: The Dunblane Shooting is mentioned in this chapter, but even though it’s just a passing reference, something like that can’t just be glossed over, not right now. Dunblane originally occurred on 14th March 1996. I push it back a year in this verse to 1995 because it’s just too close to what’s going on in this story, and too mindful of the shit sandwich we’re eating in the US right now regarding gun violence and school shootings, along with our lovely government’s lack of action about any of it.

Kendrick Castillo, among many others, deserved to graduate high school this year.

If you’ve dealt with the aftermath of gun violence, particularly in a school setting: I’m angry on your behalf, and we’re going to make the changes that keep it from (hopefully) ever happening again. Not today, and unfortunately not tomorrow, but one day. It will happen.
We’re going to make it right.

Severus arrives at the staff breakfast table on Tuesday morning to Charity’s rather high-pitched exclamation of, “Is it true?”

_Fuck, now what?_ Severus thinks in resignation. He didn’t sleep well last night, and has no idea why. He even attempted to make a go of it in the dungeons when the starlight through the tower window proved too distracting, and still had no success.

If he had to name the sensation, he would call it nervousness, which is ludicrous. He has no bloody reason to feel any such thing.

“It’s true,” Salazar answers Charity, which gains Severus’s attention. “You lot were right to be concerned about a monster in the Chamber of Secrets, as it wasn’t a true basilisk at all.”

“Merciful heavens.” Minerva looks pale. “I almost liked it better when it was an unfortunate basilisk corrupted by Tom Riddle!”

“Yes, indeed.” Dumbledore doesn’t frown, choosing to continue facing the students with a bright morning smile, but the expression is audible in his voice. “That anyone would deliberately place a magical construct within Hogwarts whose purpose from the very beginning was to perform exactly as the legend stated…”

“Corvinus Gaunt was an absolute bastard in regards to blood purity. It’s why the Gaunts began to
ruin their own bloodline with inbreeding,” Nizar offers while giving a breakfast muffin a lackluster prod with his fingertip. “It would not surprise me in the least if he’s the one who added that bit about how Salazar Slytherin’s monster would emerge from the Chamber and eat all the Muggle-borns and Half-bloods. I don’t recall hearing anything like that until the late 1700s or so.”

“Filius located a portrait in this castle of Corvinus Gaunt for me,” Salazar says, granting Severus information that he must have missed due to his late arrival. “The portrait is a perfect match for that ludicrous statue in the Chamber downstairs.”

“I told you so,” Nizar mutters.

Salazar nods in response. “Yes, but it was reassuring to view the physical proof of the match.”

“How did you get in?” Dumbledore asks, making Severus clench his jaw. He’d forgotten Salazar’s subterfuge regarding the Chamber, meant only as an excuse to get Dumbledore to admit to his ownership of the Elder Wand. “If it could not be done before—”

“It required both of us,” Nizar interrupts, sounding annoyed. “Which we should have realized before, what with both of us being in this castle. The magic was set to recognize a single Heir of Slytherin, and here we were, presenting it with a pair of them.”

“Then what of the real basilisk?” Filius asks before Dumbledore can speak again. “Where is it?”

“If I knew of his location, I’d already be seeking him out,” Salazar responds, a slight bite to his voice. “The only lead I have is to know that the basilisk nest in Wales heard rumor of a lone basilisk being moved from the north to the south, but that is all. There are so many ways to define north and south in basilisk terms, not to mention the south is host to a great number of cave systems.”

“There is a basilisk nest in Wales?” Hagrid’s voice booms out. Severus grimaces and mentally thanks Filius, once again, for getting the charms on this table sorted. “Can I off and visit them?”

“Not right now!” Minerva retorts at once. “You’ve classes to teach!”

“Oh. Right.” Hagrid pauses. “After that?”

Salazar grins down the table at the man. “After that. Perhaps a day during the students’ Easter break next week can be devoted to such, but I wouldn’t pin it a certainty, not yet.”

“So, this missing basilisk. Jalaf. If you find that he is still alive…what then?” Poppy asks.

Severus catches a brief glimpse of Salazar’s startled look before he tilts his head to look at Poppy. “Bring him back here, of course. This is his home.”

Even after properly meeting Kanza in November, Severus would have been leery at the idea of another massive basilisk in Hogwarts. He has grown to understand the species a bit better since that time—and after the Ministry battle, gained a serious appreciation for a basilisk doing its proper job of defending others. He doesn’t miss those stone-Petrified Death Eaters at all.

He still takes a gleeful amount of pleasure in the silence that Salazar just created. If it weren’t for the noise of the students, it would be dead silent in the Great Hall.

Nizar chuckles and holds up Kanza with his right hand when she deigns to be removed from his neck. “Hey, look! It’s a basilisk!”

“Yes, but she’s a baby!” Aurora snaps. “We’re a bit used to that!”
“But she is still so very lethal,” Nizar reminds them cheerfully.

“But—another giant basilisk?” Bathsheda finally whimpers.

Salazar makes a pained sound. “How big do you lot believe a basilisk to be?”

“This false basilisk was said to be quite large by those who saw it last,” Dumbledore says. “Taking a small child’s fears into account, I would venture an estimate of forty feet.”

Severus shakes his head. “No. The constructed basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets was thirty feet, at most.”

“Eight point five meters. Twenty-eight feet,” Salazar corrects. “I went back and measured the construct, which was not a pleasant task. The mother of Jalaf and Kanza, Çinara, remains the largest basilisk I’ve ever known. She was thirty feet long, far larger than anyone else in the Burgos Nest.”

Minerva turns her head enough to eye Kanza, who is still curled around Nizar’s wrist. “If Kanza’s mother is overly large, then what is a more realistic expectation?”

“For a female like Kanza, unless she chooses to take after her mother, she would be twenty to twenty-four feet long.” Salazar has been teaching long enough that he falls into an instructor’s cadence at once; Severus doubts he is even aware of it. “A girth of sixteen to eighteen inches is fairly standard. Males, however, are smaller than females. If Jalaf is alive somewhere, then he is likely a mere eighteen to twenty-two feet long. A male’s average girth is fourteen inches, much like a South American anaconda.”

“That is not nearly as terrifying in concept as something that’s forty bloody feet long,” Pomona says, looking a bit more cheerful about the concept. Severus gives her an odd look; it seems as if the woman decided that as long as she was ditching House prejudices, she is going to be ditching everything negative in regards to befouled Slytherin reputations. “It would certainly reduce the number of mice and rats that have been getting into the castle since the, er, previous occupant of the Chamber of Secrets was killed. They’re an utter nuisance in the greenhouses now.”

“There are non-magical snakes in the wild that’ve grown bigger than the basilisk sizes that ol’ Salazar just mentioned,” Hagrid says, beaming. “Reticulated pythons, now—they would be the ones to watch out for if they were needing a meal!”

“Please no reticulated pythons in the school,” Bathsheda says faintly. “I’ll deal with a basilisk back in the pipes as long as it’s allied to us, provided I do not have to pat it, but a wild animal capable of eating me is just—please. No.”

“It’s still all conjecture.” Salazar’s voice is soothing, but Severus can see Nizar’s expression, and it’s nearly a solid wall of bloody mischief. Severus wonders what Bathsheda did that has caused Nizar to begin plotting. “I hope otherwise, as Jalaf was a dear friend, but there may never again be a basilisk in this school aside from Kanza.”

“Could a mate not be found for her?” Poppy asks. “It seems cruel that she might dwell here alone.” Severus is pleased by that level of acceptance, and doubly amused when Bathsheda lets out a pathetic moan.

Salazar hesitates over his words. “For a basilisk to leave their nest, they must choose a magician as their companion. It’s…not a connection I can easily explain, but it’s nothing like a familiar. Unless someone who lives and works within this school is chosen by an infant basilisk, then there would be no choice. Kanza would dwell here alone.”
Kanza lifts her head and hisses out something that causes Salazar to smile. “She says that means more rats, mice, and spiders for her,” Nizar translates, scratching the top of Kanza’s head with his fingernail.

“Can she come with me out to the greenhouse this morning, Nizar?” Pomona asks unexpectedly. “The mice, I bloody swear!”

Kanza bobs her head and climbs down Nizar’s arm before gliding across the staff table. Minerva rolls her eyes heavenward when Kanza climbs directly through her breakfast plate. “Take that as a yes,” Nizar says, “but please return her to the castle after an hour or two. If she eats more than two mice, I’ll have vomited bits of rodent all over my quarters. Besides, just the scent of her in there roaming about will have the mice thinking twice about entering the greenhouse for a solid month.”

Pomona has already picked up Kanza and is all but cooing over the basilisk. “That won’t be a problem at all!”

“You should consider garden snakes as an addition to the greenhouses. They’re not much fond of the Highlands, but if you brought in imports from the south, and I taught them that the greenhouses were their safest and warmest places to dwell—that would certainly help with your rodent problem,” Salazar offers.

Pomona beams. “Yes, absolutely! I’ve never minded a good garden snake. They’re useful to have about!”

Severus keeps his eyes on Dumbledore after the conversation shifts to other topics, observing the man safely behind the curtain of his hair. Dumbledore did not say yes or no to a basilisk’s return. He didn’t say much of substance at all. Unless there are direct matters, like Mister Goyle’s potential expulsion, Godric’s wand, or the politics involved in the Ministry and the Order, Dumbledore’s noncommittal attitude has quickly become standard.

For fuck’s sake, Severus is now more suspicious of Dumbledore than he was before the damned Ides of March raids! He trusts his instincts, but in this instance, his instincts are driving him insane. He has no idea what this excessive paranoia means for any of them.

* * * *

Sirius has no idea how long he’s been standing in the parlor before Tonks coughs to gain his attention. “I didn’t think you were into impersonating statues, Sirius.”

He looks up from the scroll he’s holding with his right hand. In his left hand is a small parcel of letters that have been bound together with silken leather cord. “Uh—just a bit of mail, is all. Someone made certain it was forwarded along.”

“Mail?” Tonks grins. “More fan letters, is it, Your Grace?”

Sirius slowly shakes his head, too rattled to respond to the playful prodding. “No. They’re…” He thinks about it and realizes, aside from wanting to keep their contents to himself, he has no reason to lie. “They’re from my son.”

Tonks’s eyes widen before she lets out a small oh of amazement. “I’m so glad you’re properly communicating again! I know Salazar was a bit worried about the security of sending things by
owl.”

“These came by house-elf, instead. He must have asked one of the elves in Hogwarts to pass these along.” Sirius clears his throat when his voice emerges strangled. “I’d like to…can you give me a few minutes, Tonks?”

“I was just popping up here to let you know that Frances is done making breakfast. Remus is handling the washing-up so she doesn’t have to spend time scrubbing pots, and not a bit of crockery was thrown in the process.”

Sirius nods, glad to hear that. It took Frances Vance a few days to get used to the fact that the people she kept house for used magic to assist her rather than to mock her, but at least now it’s no longer an outright battle in the mornings. “All right. Ask Remus to put a Warming Charm on a stacked plate for me, please. I might be a while.”

“Not a problem.”

The moment Tonks is gone, Sirius sinks down onto the closest sofa and unrolls the scroll so he can read it again.

Sirius,

I think, time being what it is, you’re ready to have these. The letters didn’t come back into my possession until recently, as a clan of elves in Burgos held them in trust. They were written for you, as well as a few certain other individuals the child seemed to be fond of. If I hadn’t been around to deliver them, they would have been brought directly to you. Better this way, I think. It’s certainly less depressing.

I’ve no idea what any of them say. As I told Miss Granger when I granted hers into her keeping, they’re addressed to you, not to me.

The letters at the bottom of the stack belong to Remus. Try to remind him that the lesser stack does not mean a lesser act of caring on that child’s part so much as I wrote down fucking well everything. At some point my hand might have tried to escape my arm if I’d kept up that level of correspondence, along with all else happening in my life.

I’m glad to be able to give them to you. I hope they create peace rather than stir regret.

—Nizar

PS: I strongly suspect a few letters are missing, and no, I’ve no idea how I would know that or why they would be misplaced. The stack just didn’t feel right in my hands. I hope it was nothing important, because it is most assuredly long destroyed.

Sirius has to take a moment to breathe. His son, faced with the Founder’s Era, still found the time to
write to him. Harry hadn’t even known the truth, and still the man he thought to be a mere godparent had rated letters.

Thank you, God. Thank you for being a merciful bastard.

Sirius opens the first letter in the stack, which has a date of 12th January 991.

Dear Sirius,

I really miss you. You’re probably worried about me, but you don’t have to be. For the first time in my life, I really am okay. I really am safe.

Okay, I’m as safe as anyone can realistically expect to be, ever, but I am. Safe, I mean.

It’s just an odd sort of safe, considering I’m currently in the wrong millennium.

For the first time in my life, I’m allowed to be me. Not everyone’s fucking savior. Just me. It’s really nice.

Wow, that sounds stupid, doesn’t it? Definitely inadequate. Nice is not the right word, but I don’t think the right sort exists.

You’re a lazy Animagus, by the way. Apparently once you master self-transfiguration, you can be any kind of mammal you want. You don’t have to stick with the very first thing you turn into. So, you know, you can wander around as something a lot less obvious than a giant black Newfoundland.

Maybe try a cat. You could have an actual catfight with McGonagall. Not that you’d win.

Love,

Harry

It was a blunder to read any of these before breakfast. Sirius is no longer concerned about food. He’s too busy trying not to sob his eyes out in the first floor parlor.

* * * *

Severus doesn’t get a close look at Neville Longbottom’s new wand until nine o’clock that morning. Gryffindors and Slytherins find seats at the workbenches, sitting in their usual pairings and trios. Just as it is for the other fifth-years, today is devoted to note-taking regarding the Aging Potion for their brewing Double on Friday afternoon.

Please, let no one Vanish his floor on Friday. Severus knows he is probably going to be paranoid regarding that particular class until the O.W.L.s are done and the students are gone for the summer.
A student’s fifth year is the first year Severus allows wands to be out during note-taking or brewing, though the former instance is only so they can cast the dictation spells that copy down Severus’s lectures as well as their own muttered observations. It’s also when he finally introduces potions that can be manipulated by wandwork, though he is careful not to choose anything volatile.

Goyle’s act caused repercussions in this class aside from the Vanished floor, and not only because of his permanent absence. Tracey Davis is now seated with Vincent Crabbe, who is perhaps the only person left in this classroom that Miss Davis will tolerate. She considers Blishwick to be beneath her, even though Blishwick excels at acting the part of a Pure-blooded Death Eater idiot. Miss Davis is also angry that Richard Vaisey has broken off their relationship, but Severus believes that Mister Vaisey made a wise decision. Vaisey prefers to be neutral in conflicts, but he isn’t fool enough to keep dating a Baby Death Eater while Wizarding Britain is at war.

Severus paces around the classroom and stops by Longbottom, who is sitting with Miss Shafiq and Mister Nott. He once again regrets that he instigated and encouraged so much of this group’s hostility with necessary, spy-driven silence. He can see so much more potential now, and if he had not been so bound by Dumbledore’s orders, more of these students might be capable of making it into N.E.W.T. Potions.

The red-veined ash wand is resting on the workbench next to Neville’s scroll, quill, and ink bottle. It’s in easy reach, in the same spot that Neville always placed his previous wand. There is nothing that would suggest he is placing it on display.

Severus has held that wand, and though it did not suit him in the slightest, he could feel its potential as a tool for someone with the right talent to match it. Months ago, Severus would have laughed at the idea of Longbottom using that wand. After his initial shocked, doubt-laden reaction…now he wonders if it’s the sort of kick in the pants that Longbottom has needed since his first day of schooling.

“Mister Longbottom.”

“Yes, sir?” Longbottom looks up nervously, but he no longer stutters or quails. He does, however, look as if he’s still expecting Severus to set him on fire for the spilled Vanishing Potion.

“Do not use that wand during your brewing until you’ve had the opportunity to test it in controlled circumstances,” Severus says. Longbottom nods, understanding that ‘controlled circumstances’ means Severus’s office. He won’t be available in the afternoon, so he will send Longbottom a brief note advising him of the best opportunity to test how his plant-volatility melds with a Founder’s ash wand.

Severus flicks his wand at the blackboard (he still doesn’t like the replacement) so that the ingredients for the week’s potion appear. “The Aging Potion. Let’s discuss its uses, famous failings, and the reason for its efficacy based on the properties of its ingredients.”

The class goes well. With Easter Break looming, these students are not slacking off; they are intensely, grimly preparing for the homework that accompanies the week off from classes. Nizar is merely allowing his students the opportunity to work on their essays, though he did warn the lot of them that, with a week of free time, they had better meet his exacting standards.

For once, Severus would like to cut back on the amount of work he will assign at the end of each fifth-year class later this week, but he can’t. There is too much they still need to learn, and Severus might be the one at fault for their lack of preparation.

No, there is no might. He is at fault for it for choosing to allow Dumbledore to dictate his actions.
Severus knows from personal experience that it’s exceptionally difficult to concentrate and learn in a hostile environment.

Severus gives his first-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs the lesson the other Houses of their year received yesterday. Then he does the same for the third-year Slytherin and Gryffindors.

He wanders among them as they obediently copy down their potion ingredients, listening. The quiet chatter he overhears from both classes is the suspicion that maybe Longbottom’s wand isn’t really the same one that Godric Gryffindor held. Not even the Slytherins remember to quiet themselves when he is nearby, which is amusing. They will learn, though often that recognition of the need for subtlety doesn’t truly occur until they’re N.E.W.T. students.

Black is the one to roll his eyes at Miss Whitehead. “Phyllis, if you’d ever once stop and look at Godric’s portrait when it’s the younger Godric hanging around, you’d see that it’s the same wand. He has it in his hand or tucked into his belt, and that wing grip is kind of obvious!”

“But it’s Longbottom!” Miss Whitehead persists. “He’s been an utter disaster from day one, I’ve heard, and I haven’t seen a thing to convince me otherwise!”

“Well, maybe he’ll convince you now,” Black mutters. “I’ve got a willow wand, Phyllis, and that’s supposed to be for people with potential. What potential? I’m a Muggle-born who can write magical theory well enough, but I’m utter pants at the magic itself. But—” He glares at her. “I’m only a third-year. Maybe the wand that matched to me knows something I don’t. Same with Longbottom, right? He hasn’t even taken his O.W.L.s yet. That’s two more years to figure things out.”

Miss Whitehead gives Black a grudging nod of agreement. Severus is left wondering when Edward Black decided it was time to develop a spine. Many of his students have surprised him this year by growing beyond his expectations in similar fashion.

The arrival of the lunch hour is a relief. Severus escapes his classroom and takes the twisting path of corridors to the door of his own quarters. Then he flips the entwined basilisk emblem and enters Nizar’s quarters by way of the magicked door in the tower. “Good afternoon,” he says to announce himself.

“Hello!” Nizar responds, though his nose is practically glued to the small paperback book he’s holding. “How was your morning?”

“Acceptable,” Severus replies. “Yours?”

“All N.E.W.T. students,” Nizar says, “all of them seemingly intent on proving that they’re insane during their Practicals. Lunch is a welcome reprieve today.”

That does explain Nizar’s desire to escape into a bit of fiction. “You’re reading that one again?”

Nizar looks up from his gifted copy of *Dragonsbane*. “For the third time, actually.”

“Why?” Severus asks, settling down at the table to join Nizar for a lunch that doesn’t involve needing to coddle or manage anyone else. He’s read that book’s brief synopsis, but Severus is uncertain if wants to read about princesses of any sort. Alice is frustrating enough for being exceptionally English and possibly insane.

“Because it’s full of entertaining political shenanigans that I do not have to be responsible for in the slightest,” Nizar replies. “Less reassuring is the bit about wizards stealing magic, but in the book, that’s easily solved.” He turns the page. “Life would be so much simpler if Voldemort would simply melt in a bucketful of soapy washing water.”
“Like the Wicked Witch of the West.”

Nizar glances up in confusion. “Who?”

“I would try to explain, but I haven’t seen that film since the age of seven.” Severus takes the teapot as soon as it is polite enough to do so without snatching it directly from his host. “Needless to say, it seems to be a theme among evil wizards and witches in non-magical literature.”

“Cleanliness is next to godliness, therefore anyone evil will melt in the presence of soap and water?” Nizar ponders the idea. “So. Much. Simpler.”

“Simpler than what?” Severus asks.

“Simpler than stabbing people, usually,” Nizar says. “Certainly easier than hexing an entire army. All one would need is a garden hose with a soap dispenser attached.”

“No, not that. You’d want a larger hose hooked up to a fire hydrant. Stronger water pressure,” Severus explains. “I give up. When you’re done, I’m borrowing that book.”

Nizar smiles. “There’s a sequel.”

Severus gives him a suspicious glance. “Is it worth it?”

“It is not on a level with Through the Looking Glass.”

“Ah.” Severus studies the bright colors on the book’s front cover. “Why Dragonsbane?”

“The American title is Dealing with Dragons. Gods know what the publisher was thinking in regards to the book’s release here, unless they were hoping to appeal to everyone who is capable of remembering the time when a dragon eating your livestock and squashing your crops in the process was a legitimate concern.”

“So…they were hoping to market this book to two people,” Severus surmises. “Three, if Nicholas Flamel is lying about his age.”

Nizar snorts. “Everyone thought I was bloody dead. More like one person, maybe, and that’s only if Salazar was too pissed to be circumspect. Fortunately, the bloodthirsty aspect of childhood probably helped sales a great deal.”

Now he is suspicious for an entirely different reason. “You sound far too familiar with book sales and publishing.”

“Well, if one is going to publish, one shouldn’t be ignorant about the process, now should they?” Nizar counters in response.

Severus narrows his eyes. “Are you going to publish?” He wants this man’s brilliance in Potions to be recognized, even if he has to hover over Nizar, shoving ink and paper at him, until the damned book is written.

“That depends.” Nizar stares right back at him. “Are you going to be stupid enough to off and visit your glass supplier on your own to order what you need, or are you going to be sensible and take someone with you?”

“Everyone in the faculty is either occupied with class, detentions, or attending a Death Eater’s funeral. It’s the bloody Midlands, Nizar, not London.”
“I’ll quote you. I’ll quote you admitting that Dumbledore said something sensible,” Nizar threatens. “And I’ll do it in front of the entire school.”

He scowls. “And who would you suggest, then?”

“Someone of age who isn’t a Death Eater, who would only need her Head of House’s permission to leave school—especially given that she would be in said Head of House’s company. Like, oh, a convenient war mage.”

Severus finds an immediate flaw in that plan. “Miss Greenwood has your brother’s History class at five o’clock.”

Nizar snorts in amusement. “You must still be preoccupied with Friday’s incident, or else you would have seen the advantage in that at once.”

“Fine.” Nizar has a point; Miss Greenwood’s class schedule would give him a convenient excuse to escape if this meeting to discuss the resupplying of his glassware runs annoyingly long. “You’ve already asked her, haven’t you?”

“Multi-tasking is a useful, time-honored tradition,” Nizar says.

Severus rolls his eyes. “So are contact poisons.”

“I still want a warning about the type of poison first,” Nizar replies, and turns to the next page in the book.

* * * * *

“Where are we?” Miss Greenwood asks the moment the Apparition is complete. “It feels like we traveled a long way south.”

Severus glances around to get his bearings. The Apparition point for the area is shielded from prying eyes; no one noticed their arrival. They’re near downtown, so the view is of streets lined with old, graceful buildings that have been well-maintained despite the modern amenities and additions. “This is Stoke-on-Trent. We’re in Staffordshire, in the West Midlands. Yes, we did come quite a ways south.”

“Stoke-on-Trent,” Miss Greenwood repeats thoughtfully. “I believe I’ve heard of it. There is a lot of pottery-work done here, isn’t there, sir?”

Severus nods. “Miss Greenwood, you are outside of school, acting in the guardian capacity of a war mage. Given that means we are currently of equal rank aside from your nobility title, please use my given name.”

Miss Greenwood eyes him. “As soon as you start referring to me as Adele, sir.”

He grimaces to acknowledge the point. Such habits die hard, especially when they’re not in the sort of danger that would make him think otherwise. “Adele. If England has a pottery capital, you’re standing in it.”

“And we’re looking to see a glassmaker, then?” Adele asks. “Seems like the right sort of place, if
they’re focused on kilns and such here.”

“Yes. I’ve been ordering from this particular magical glassmaker for the last decade.” Severus finds the correct street and leads them in that direction. “I’ve never visited before, but I’ve never had to replace my glassware in such quantity, or in such a hurry. It’s more…socially acceptable to make a large, rushed order in person rather than send an owl.”

“You mean it gives them the impression you’re serious, and here’s the money in advance, hop to it?”

Severus glances at her, smiling. “Essentially. Most magical craftsmen in Britain appreciate that courtesy if you don’t yet have an established relationship outside of correspondence.”

Adele peers around with interest at the various shops as they walk past. “I’ll keep that in mind, then. What’s the name of this place?”

“Stoke Turnabout Glassware. If I’m recalling correctly, they sell to the non-magical in the front of the shop, and the rear is devoted to magical glassware. It means they can operate in plain sight without concerning themselves with the Statute.”

“Brilliant,” Adele comments. “It seems like that’s a better way to handle hiding magic from non-magical people. You’re keeping them from getting into dangerous things, but not separating yourself from everyone else.”

Severus thinks on it. “I do not prefer that…mingling. I attempted it in Cokeworth before I gave up on it. That doesn’t mean you’re incorrect, though.”

“Or maybe you were trying to mingle with people in the wrong place entirely, Severus,” Adele suggests, her eyes on a window advertising ladies’ dress wear that is more in line with posh Pure-blood standards. The displayed examples are far more flattering than the business-like garments that are often being passed off as ladies’ dresses of late.

“That is entirely possible, yes,” Severus admits. Cokeworth is not exactly known for its sociable atmosphere.

“Why this particular glassmaker, then?” The next shop is devoted to lollies and chocolates, and smells like it might be capable of giving Honeydukes competition. “There are at least three other glassmakers I know of in Britain, and two of them are in Diagon Alley.”

“One of the two is absolutely inferior, and should not even be trusted for the purchase of drinking vessels,” Severus says, not bothering to hide the scorn in his voice. “The other is better, but I learned in my first five years of teaching that about one in twenty of their pieces had a flaw that would express itself in interesting ways. I don’t think it’s intentional; after meeting the glass maker, I suspect it’s an accidental expression of that man’s magic.”

“But you can’t take chances with those odds in a Potions classroom.” Adele gives the record shop they pass a baffled look. Severus tries not to mimic the expression, but some of the posters advertising current or upcoming albums features art that is mind-boggling. The music is interesting, at least. He’ll have to stop by before they leave and ask about the song that was just playing. “Which left you with only this shop?” she asks.

“No, there was another glassmaker in Inverness for a time. Madam Cara was on the cusp of retirement when I found her, though, and suggested I do my ordering from Stoke-on-Trent if I needed proper magical stability. She was insistent that it was the source of the best magical glass in Britain, and I would be hard-pressed to find better on the Continent—and yes, she was counting her
own work as inferior to what was sold by Stoke Turnabout.”

“Amazing,” Adele says. “I’d love to meet the glassmith, then, or all of them if it’s a group effort.”

“Congratulations; you will easily attain that goal.” Based on the numbers on each shop, they’re getting close.

The newspaper stand he passes by makes his lip curl in disgust. Apparently a red-top or three got it into their heads that the anniversary of the Dunblane shooting should be devoted to conspiracy theories and some atrociously falsified “interviews” with the survivors. As if any parent would allow their six-year-old to be bullied by one of those disgraces masquerading as a newspaper. The only bright point he sees is a brief article that assures readers that the United Kingdom’s intention to enact a handgun ban are still in progress. After being threatened with one on a train platform, Severus would be happy never to see another handgun ever again.

He still doesn’t care that it was disabled. He grew up in Cokeworth. Idiots with pistols were already a familiar danger.

“‘Questions Still Abound Regarding Dunblane Primary School Massacre—is the Crown Covering Up Intentional School Homicide?’” Adele reads, her brow wrinkling. “Is this something that really happened? Also, the writer of this article should be throttled. All homicide is intentional, hence why it’s called homicide.”

“The shooting happened. Last year.” Severus hadn’t heard about it when it occurred, busy dealing with the stupid Triwizard Tournament and a potentially suicidal Hogwarts Champion. “I don’t wish to discuss it; it’s an upsetting topic. If you’d like to know more, send away to non-magical newspapers which are not those for back-issues on the matter. *The Independent* would be a good choice.”

“Of course. I’ll do that, sir.”

Severus finds a shop with a clear glass pane stretching almost the entire way across, unbroken aside from a set of stained-glass double doors. The larger glass pane has shelves attached, and a different piece of artistic blown glass is sitting on every single one.

“’I’d be so afraid someone would come by with a stone and break the glass,” Adele says. “They’re so beautiful!’”

Severus lets his fingers brush the clear pane before he rests his hand on the door. “Protective magic on the glass,” he murmurs to her as he pulls the door open. “I imagine anyone making the attempt would see that rock bouncing off their forehead.”

Inside, the place is lit like a museum. Natural light floods the front half of the shop, where most of the artistic pieces live on shelves and pedestals. The back of the shop—the public, non-magical part—has lighting that shines down from specific fixtures in the ceiling, highlighting high-end sets of vases and glassware: tumblers, stemware, varying vessels for beer, pitchers, and even a single punch bowl set with accompanying matched glasses with handles that hook directly over the edge of the bowl. There is even, in one corner opposite the counter and till, non-magical laboratory glassware.

“Can I help you?”

Severus turns around to find a woman with near-white ash blonde hair approaching, perhaps two inches shorter than Nizar. If she stepped out of those high heels, she’d be even shorter. She’s Gaelic-pale and freckled, but her clothing is of similar quality, style, and taste to Bernice of London. Her
haircut is the only incongruity, as it’s just shy of being a short bob relic from the 1970s. She is perhaps in her forties; she either dyes her hair, magically alters it, or is still blessed with a complete lack of grey. She also seems familiar, but he’s not certain why.

He knows the moment she recognizes him. Her eyes suddenly grow huge, revealing eyes that are close in color to the famous sea-green in a few of the northern Gaelic populations. “Oh. We weren’t—expecting—”

“I’m sorry,” Severus apologizes at once. “I didn’t have time to wait for an owl. I need to place a rather large rush order of specialized glass, and worse, I need it in a fairly short period of time. I also didn’t think it polite to send an owl with that sort of request.”

“I—no. Of course not. That should be no difficulty for a long-time customer.” She recovers her aplomb remarkably well, but if she always runs the front of this shop, she would be used to that. The prices on the artistic pieces, and the longevity of this shop’s location, show that they run a brisk business on both sides of the magical border. “I’m sorry, I’ve yet to introduce myself.” She extends her hand politely. “My name is Diana.”

“Severus,” he insists in return. The moment he briefly grips her hand, he understands the familiarity. There is magic in her blood, but it’s like shaking hands with Argus Filch. “By chance, would you have a cousin who was once named Alexander Fawley?”

Her expression flattens into a neutral that is desperate to hide displeasure. “Unfortunately, yes. My maiden name was Fawley, but I’ve had no contact with most of my family since I was a teenager. I was sent away to very posh boarding school, but they neglected to ask for my return.”

Severus inclines his head. “My apologies for bringing up bad memories.” He allows one corner of his mouth to lift. “You really didn’t miss out on much, I assure you. He was a twit.”

Diana catches herself in the midst of an unladylike snort. “Oh. All right. Nothing against Squibs, then?”

“Not myself, no. Certainly not the man I’m dating, who spent a very loud period of time yelling at anyone who would listen that Squibs still have magic; they simply cannot use it in a traditionally British manner. His brother feels similarly.”

She stares at him. “Oh. Well. That’s…encouraging. You’ll want to be meeting with my husband, then. For more than one reason, I believe.”

“More than one reason?” Severus repeats, curious, and gestures for Adele to leave off the artistic gawping to join him. Given her fascination with the non-magical paintings at Frogmore, he wonders if she has hidden plans to spend her life devoted to the arts rather than anything mathematical or scientific.

Diana gives him an undecipherable look. “Oh, dear. That’s going to make things awkward.” She glances around the shop until her eyes lock on a twenty-something woman in a less expensive outfit that still attempts to mimic Diana’s clothes. “I need to take customers into the back to discuss a special order. Mind the shop, Clarice.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clarice replies, and immediately accosts an older couple as they come in through the doors.

“This way,” Diana says. “If you’re both capable of it, I suggest you grant yourselves Cooling Charms at once. My husband is working at the forge this afternoon, and it’s going to be like walking
into a literal furnace once we leave the building.”

“Do you need the same?” Severus asks, following Diana through a door that wasn’t visible at all until she placed her hand on it.

Diana shakes her head as they walk through the backside of the shop. “Mine are built into my clothing, and activate when I cross the shop wards. It’s far more convenient that way.”

The magical rear of the shop is much smaller than the front. There are products on display, but none of it is dedicated to art. Severus notes multiple samples of the varying types of magical glassware that are most common in Britain. Extra pieces that accompany each example are packed in reinforced shipping boxes stacked nearby.

Then Diana pushes open another door. Severus is glad he listened to her advice regarding the Cooling Charm. Even with the magic’s protection, it still feels like he just turned a corner and ran face-first into a bonfire.

Even if a magician wants to escape every single trapping of a non-magical lifestyle, some things cannot be avoided. The forge is fueled by magic, a sensation that Severus can feel through his feet, but the man in front of it is using a Muggle-designed face shield and thick, fire-retardant gloves.

“He’ll take them off when he comes ’round to the other side to finish that off,” Diana says quietly. “You don’t need the protection at the glory hole, just when you’re using the hotter side.”

Nizar is a terrible influence. It takes a great deal of tongue-biting not to say anything puerile in response to that.

Diana gives him a sideways glance, as if suspecting she knows exactly what he’s thinking. Severus imagines that with a name like glory hole, she and her husband have heard every joke imaginable. “He’s melting in the last bits of color for that piece now, so it shouldn’t take long. Just don’t interrupt until he places the piece into the kiln for cooling.” She points at a large, oblong box that looks like a refrigerator. “Otherwise it will explode from cooling down too fast.”

The glasssmith steps back from the furnace with a red-hot and round piece of glass on the end of the pipe. Without breaking stride, he closes the furnace door on that side and paces around to the other, slowly spinning the pipe and its glass blob as he walks. When he places it down on a table that has wooden blocks to support the pipe, he strips off the face shield and gloves, tossing them to the side.

Diana’s husband is also blond, but that’s what Lily’s parents would have called a dirty blond, not his wife’s pale ash. His face is red from the heat, but his skin is dark from the sun.

Like Diana, he also has disturbingly familiar features.

Severus rounds on Adele when she lets out a startled squeak. Quiet, he orders, letting that instruction be a near-visible command in his gaze.

Adele stares back at him, her jaw hanging open. But—

He shakes his head, giving her one more firm glare, before turning back to watch the rest of the glassmaking process. The product has been removed from the pole—somehow, now featuring a round bottom, narrow neck, and then a flared lip. The color Diana was speaking of is appearing as green with blue centers, and resembles ink blobs that run down the surface in asymmetrical waves. Then a tool is used to reshape the opening flare, giving it a spout.

“Oh!” Adele breathes as the shaping continues. “A pitcher!”
“Good eye,” the glassmith says without looking up from his work. Severus tries not to grind his teeth; that West Midlands accent is not helping a damned thing. “Granted, a bit obvious at this point, isn’t it?”

“I suppose?” Adele offers, her voice pitched too high to sound normal. “It’s pretty!” she blurs in addition, noting Severus’s renewed glare.

“Personally, I think it’s a bit of a mess, but that’s what happens when you take requests.” The pitcher is temporarily abandoned; the glasssmith returns with a short length of forge-bright glass that is quickly applied to the sides of the pitcher. More tools and seemingly effortless work turn it into a graceful handle, revealing more of the same blue and green as the glass begins to cool. Then he puts the gloves back on before picking up the completed pitcher. “And that’s this one into the kiln.”

The moment the glasssmith turns away from the closed kiln, he looks at them, performs a visible double-take, and stares at Severus for a moment. “Bloody hell.” He pauses, and then scowls. “You’re the reason I had to give my wife twenty quid in February!”

“It’s your fault for being willfully blind, John,” Diana says dryly.

John glares at his wife. “You could’ve warned me who’d just turned up in my bloody shop!”

“What, and spend the evening in the burn ward after you dropped molten glass on your feet? I don’t bloody well think so!” Diana smirks in triumph when John’s expression twists in familiar dismay. “John, your long-term customer, Professor Severus Snape, came to place a large order and did us the courtesy of doing so in person. And this is the Lady Adele of the Greenwood, I believe.”

Adele nods. “Yes, ma’am.” Her eyes are still darting back and forth between Severus and the glasssmith. “Er…is anyone going to explain this?”

Severus sighs, but it comes out more like an irritated growl. “John R. Jones, I presume.”

John looks surprised. “John Richard Prince, actually. Mum insisted out of spite when I was about eleven. I wasn’t aware anyone out there aside from my mother even remembered when I still had her name—not that she really remembers that either, anymore.”

“Goblin magic. That’s the only reason I know.” Severus is still trying to parse when, exactly, his entire afternoon decided to bugger off and leave him foundering in a pile of dramatic shit caused by his bloody useless grandfather. “It didn’t recognize anything else, probably because of the name change.” It had to have been done with magic and some of the older adoption privacy charms meant to protect changed identities, or the goblins would have presented him with much more useful information than a single name and birthdate.

“Right. That. Didn’t think anyone would even be looking.” John Richard Prince is a hazel-eyed blond with the capacity to bloody tan without burning, but there is no denying that the man is a Prince, and it doesn’t have a damned thing to do with his name.

“I wasn’t looking for—” Severus is still trying not to grind his teeth. He had no plans in place; he hadn’t intended to seek this mysterious blood relative out until after Voldemort was dead. “It was an attempt at vault reclamation that bloody failed because you exist.”

This would be so much fucking easier if the man didn’t look like an older version of Severus.

“I told you: so very awkward,” Diana mutters.

Adele gives Severus a look that is verging on accusatory. “I didn’t think there were any members of
the Prince family left. Not according to Professor Snape, anyway.”

“I only found out in February, and decided not to mention it,” Severus retorts. “For reasons that should be quite obvious!”

Accusation shifts to disbelief. “Obvious to whom? A bloody Seer?”

“I actually went to quite a bit of effort not to turn up on Wizarding Britain’s radar,” John offers in a wry voice. “My father might have been a wanker, but the name is famous and obvious, and really, I was fine with avoiding all of it.”

“This is driving me mental,” Adele says angrily. “Please someone explain why you look like a version of my Head of House that is aware of the existence of sunlight! You even bloody sound like him!”

“My maternal grandfather had an affair with a woman who was not his wife, because not only was he a complete prick, he was a fucking hypocrite,” Severus announces in a flat voice. “And no, I didn’t mean the pun. Adele Greenwood, John Richard Prince is my half-uncle. My mother would have despised him on principle, so it’s really for the best that she’s too dead for that to be a concern.”

“Oh. Right. That would be…oh, Rita Skeeter would have a field day with that,” Adele says in sudden realization.

“What—no!” Severus rolls his eyes. “If that ridiculous woman wanted to drag my prick of a grandfather through the mud, I’d help her do it!”

“I’m more concerned about what she’d have to say about my mother, personally,” John says.

“Or my kids,” Diana adds.

“Kids?” Severus repeats in blank disbelief. Adele doesn’t help the situation at all by breaking out in a loud fit of giggles when she notices whatever idiotic expression must be on his face.
House of Glass

Chapter Summary

“Well, this isn’t really fair. Thanks to the newspapers, we know quite a bit about you, but you don’t know a damned thing about me.”

Chapter Notes

Screw it. I'm sick, terrified, exhausted, and basically in a lovely mood, and it's already Friday somewhere east of here. Have a slightly early chapter. <3

Clarice the assistant is placed in charge of Stoke Turnaround Glassware for the day so that Diana and John can escort Severus and Adele to their home. It’s a short trip; John owns the entire building. ‘Home’ is a two-storey converted flat directly above the shop. It’s bright and tasteful, an entirely functional space that still has hints of art lying about in the form of both glass and what Severus thinks might be watercolor paintings. He could be wrong; art was never one of his strong points.

John excuses himself immediately, citing a need for clean clothing. That leaves them alone with Diana, but she’s no help. All she does is give them non-verbal permission to look around the expansive sitting room before heading off to perform her own mystery task.

There is magic in the home, probably in the form of cleaning charms set to perform their tasks whenever needed. The rest of it, though, is entirely non-magical: electrical outlets, telephone, telly, radio, appliances that run off electricity rather than magic, standard plumbing, and not a moving portrait to be seen.

There are framed, non-magical photographs of the family on the walls, but not to ridiculous excess like Severus observed in the Dursley home. There are, indeed, three children, though none of them have Eileen Prince’s pinched features. They’re too happy, too healthy. The eldest looks as if she’s almost old enough for Hogwarts: she has black hair, a healthy tan like her father, properly Gaelic sea-green eyes, and a wide smile. The second child is a boy who looks like a clone of his mother but for his brown hair. He is probably in primary school, maybe second or third year. The youngest child is also a boy, one who is most often photographed with two fingers in his mouth—still a toddler. He’s the only one to have the Prince line’s absurdly pale skin, but it’s paired with his mother’s pale ash-blond hair. The toddler would appear as if he’s veering toward albinism but for his Prince-inherited black eyes.

“That one looks like a chessboard happened to him,” Adele murmurs, smiling at the photograph. “I’ll bet he’s darling.”

“He’s trouble, is what he is,” Diana comments on her return, noting where their attention has gone. “But if Ian keeps that hair color, he’ll be a looker when he grows up.”

Severus gives her a blank stare. He has never heard anyone consider that pale skin and those black eyes to be anything of the sort.
Nizar would disagree with him. Actually, Nizar might be willing to poison him for continuing that line of thought. Fuck.

“Are they all magical?” he asks, hoping the question emerges in a tone that says that he doesn’t give a damn if they aren’t. It would be nice to see a restoration of the magical Prince line, even if the rest of Wizarding Britain never finds out about it.

“Unless Jessamine and Lee are pranking us regarding the little one, they are.” Diana still looks pleased to be discussing her children. “I’m glad, myself. It would be harder on them if it was a mixed bag. We’ll be visiting the Magical Borough of Rome the week Jessamine turns eleven this summer. Their wandmakers are a bit more open-minded than Ollivanders in Diagon Alley. No offence,” she hurriedly adds.

Severus grants her a faint smile. “My wand did not come from Diagon Alley. It came from Norway, made by a now-deceased wandmaker named Embla Holt.”

“I’ve heard of her.” John reappears in clean clothing that hasn’t been scorched by intense heat. Much of the red on his skin faded away after leaving the heat of the forge, making it even more bloody obvious that he is a close relation. The Prince family never lowered themselves to the same sort of inbreeding that created the Black family cesspool, among other famous examples, but their features have been distinctive for at least four generations. “If I hadn’t found a match in Wizarding Paris, Holt was one of the first suggestions they gave my mother for wandmaking alternatives.”

Severus has an immense appreciation for the kitchen. It’s not only clean, well-lit, and fit for a family to eat in—the exact opposite of his childhood home—but one of the cabinets is opened to reveal a selection of liquor from magical and non-magical sources. “I don’t know about you, but I’m bloody well having a shot,” John says. “Any other takers?”

“Please. Just not gin,” Severus requests. He takes a seat at the table when Diana gives him a gesture that speaks of one who is used to hosting and directing the sorts of dinner parties that Severus loathes. Adele quickly sits down next to him, still exploring the kitchen with her eyes. Despite her visits to Frogmore and Ten Downing, he suspects it to be the first non-magical kitchen she’s ever seen.

“Lady Adele?” John asks, one eyebrow raised. Severus is irritated by that; facial gestures are not supposed to be bloody genetic. “I know from reading the Prophet that you’re legal.”

“Er.” Adele glances at Severus, sees no disapproval, and nods. “I also ask for a lack of gin, but only the one drink, please. I have class at five o’clock.”

“That does make this a bit short for what should definitely be a longer sit-down, doesn’t it?” John comments. The bottle he selects is rum with a French label, but Severus doesn’t see enough of the text to further identify it.

The delicate tumbler he’s given is tall enough to hold two shots. Severus puts his nose to it out of habit: caramel, hibiscus—interesting choice—vanilla, and…raspberries, perhaps. That one he isn’t certain of. It’s very smooth, though, which means it’s normally a drink far out of his budget.

He still hasn’t checked to see what amount of money he’s receiving from the Crown’s stipend. He’s too used to living off of a Hogwarts teacher’s salary, and the idea of having any sort of extra money is discomfiting. It also makes him wonder if Salazar has carried through on his January threat to grant all of the teachers a raise.

John and Diana sit down across from them, though Severus notes that Diana passed on the liquor
and has water, instead. “Well, this isn’t really fair,” John says after emptying his glass. “Thanks to
the newspapers, we know quite a bit about you, but you don’t know a damned thing about me.”

“You’re a glassblower,” Severus responds in a dust-dry voice.

John chuckles, an open, honest sound that Severus never heard as a child unless he visited Lily’s
parents. “True. What else, then?”

“According to goblin magic, you were born on third May in 1947, so you’re forty-eight years old.
Other than that?” Severus shakes his head. “I’ve been buying glassware from you on a retired
glassmaker’s recommendation for a decade, so I know you’re magically talented and well-trained at
crafting the sort of glassware needed for potions. You also didn’t school at Hogwarts.”

John nods in affirmation. “I didn’t, no. Mum didn’t even know Silvanus Prince was a wizard until an
owl dropped a Hogwarts letter in her lap while we were at the park one day in July. She’d pressed
him, you see, trying to get the man she’d met in Bournemouth to come up to the Midlands and finally
meet his son. Silvanus put her off for years until finally, when I was three years old, he sent one last
letter telling her that he had no son; only a daughter.”

“That does sound like my grandfather,” Severus replies.

John seems amused by that. “Mum—Margaret Vera Jones is her name—she had his name and she
had the bit about the daughter, so she hired a man who was able to dig up that Silvanus Prince lived
in London, was married to an equally pleasant woman named Eden, and that they had a sixteen-year-
old daughter named Eileen attending a boarding school in the north. That was about 1950. I was
having bits of accidental magic from that age onward, but she didn’t know a thing about magic. It
was always minor nonsense, too, the sort you can shrug off and say it’s a coincidence.”

“And then: Hogwarts letter,” Adele guesses, smiling.

“It certainly helped Mum realize the whole of things, yes. She was bloody furious. A nice bloke from
Hogwarts—Thorn, I believe was his name—came out to explain things to us hapless Muggles. He
also introduced us to Diagon Alley, and Mum didn’t waste much time. She was always swift on the
uptake; she learned the ways of the Ministry and the goblins both. When all of the forms were
signed, she had my family name changed to Prince. Spite, she told me later. Mum wanted Silvanus
Prince to be forced to deal with that consequence, even if he never said another word to us. It wasn’t
until she learned that there was exactly one Prince left in Wizarding Britain, and she’d off and
married some bloke her parents didn’t approve of, that Mum realized she’d put me in a spot. Also,
spite: she wasn’t about to send me to the same school that Silvanus Prince attended, so off I’m
shipped to Beauxbatons. She worked as a French translator, so we were both fluent. Not much of a
learning curve for language, but definitely a bit of a shock for the culture. It wasn’t just the magic,
but the mixed-species students, and how bloody casual the school was about it all.”

Severus frowns. John seems to be describing a pleasant childhood, which is…odd. “I know what it
was like in that era for children born out of wedlock in non-magical areas. Even Wizarding Britain
could be cruel about it.”

John snorts. “No, no problems there. She told everyone that my father, her new fiancé, got called up
for the Malayan Emergency and never came home. In those days, especially after the losses from
World War II, it was considered a bit more acceptable for a woman to have a child out of wedlock
when the honored soldier was lost. Mum never married after that, which just fueled the idea that she
was heartbroken over losing her soldier fiancé.

“In Beauxbatons, they structure things similar to what the non-magical students get aside from the
“That does explain the skill,” Severus murmurs. “Andalucía has been prized for glass-making for a millennium.” Nizar had spoken of visiting it once while still portrait-bound. What little he could recall was the awe-inspiring colorful glasswork and glass mosaics the Moors had constructed all over the place.

“It certainly ground in the realization that I’d found exactly what I wanted to do with my life, but I didn’t want to stay in Spain to do it,” John says. “I lived there for five years, and that was enough. I came right back here to Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, living in a flat upstairs from mum’s old place. Then it was all about saving up to get the shop going. Mum always made good money as a translator, but it’s still a bit of work if you’re going to set up properly, and I wanted to do it right. All I had in mind was a storefront and a workshop, but Diana had to go and ruin everything.”

The last bit is said fondly enough that Adele smiles. Severus is quietly pondering the bewildering notion that one is capable of being a Prince without being a complete arsehole.

“He met me about a year after coming back to England, in 1971,” Diana says. “I was living in Diagon Alley, working as a bloody maid in The Leaky Cauldron. Tom Mullen is a good sort, especially since he was willing to hire a Squib, but I hated it. I knew it wasn’t the sort of life I wanted, but what choice did I have? I had a good education thanks to that boarding school. Could have done bloody near anything, if I wanted, but what I wanted was to keep magic in my life as much as I could.

“I’m out at the market nearest the Cauldron, looking for something to put together for dinner, and this blond-haired bloke strolls right up to me and asks if I’ve got the time.” She smirks. “I looked at his arm and told him he was bloody well capable of reading his own watch. He turns around and says no, do you have the time to have dinner with me tonight? It’s the most suave thing he ever managed. The rest was just ridiculous, but by then it was too late for me; I was hooked.”

“Diana was shocked that a wizard wanted to date her. I was shocked that she thought it odd. I wasn’t raised on Wizarding Britain’s culture, see, and in France, no one really gives a damn,” John explains. “It wouldn’t have mattered to me if she didn’t have a spot of magic. I was smitten the moment I saw her. We dated for five years before she finally agreed to marry me.

“Of course, she still thought we were going to be living in my small flat, and the money I’d saved was just to open a shop and a place to work. Instead, I’d sold pretty much everything I ever made. I had enough money to buy this building and still set everything up proper. I wasn’t going to take a bride back to that flat. I wanted to bring her to a home big enough for kids.”

“Slytherin,” Severus comments, amused.

John shrugs. “I think one of those famous Hat Stalls would be far more likely, but I’m not fussed. I won’t be sending Jessamine to Hogwarts this autumn, especially not with a war against that You-Know-Who idiot going on.”

“Especially not with Hogwarts’ attitude towards mixed-species students, Squibs, and its utterly shit curriculum,” Diana adds, scowling. “I didn’t realize how much of a lucky break my boarding school
education really was until I compared notes with a few Hogwarts graduates my age and realized—they didn’t know a bloody thing about the rest of the world. They could cast spells and put on fancy magical displays, but not one of them could balance a household budget or understand primary school science concepts!”

“There are two ancient, angry Slytherins who are trying to fix all of that,” Severus says.

“Will they succeed?” John asks bluntly. “We’ve been reading every single article about Hogwarts, even the ones that are complete shite, but I haven’t seen much about changes in the school. I might consider keeping the kids closer if I knew the education would be worth it, but the war is still the biggest concern.”

“It has not been discussed or presented to the newspapers, not yet, because it is still wise to remain on good terms with the Ministry when there is an election for Minister for Magic pending.” Severus thinks on it while finishing off the rum in his glass. “That being said, I really don’t think they’re going to give anyone much choice. Salazar Deslizarse has already connected Hogwarts to an interest-earning account he built up for the very purpose of making Hogwarts’ budget entirely independent from the Ministry of Magic. The school governing board still exists, but we’re all ignoring it, as they were useless to begin with unless they wanted to play at terrible, interfering politics. The intent is to see it absolved completely. The school charter has been recovered so that the Headmaster and the Heads of House are aware of their true roles in Hogwarts, and that is where any educational oversight was always meant to be. Eventually, perhaps, the UK’s educational oversight committees might be involved, but the Statute makes that so complicated we have no idea how it could even be done. Salazar has also been digging through so many teaching lists for bringing in new faculty that I have a headache just contemplating it.”

“I think they will,” Adele says. “Like Severus said: they’re not really in the mood to give anyone much of a choice. Professor Salazar wants to see the school restored to the education standards the Founders held, which sounds like it’s a lot closer to what you did in Beauxbatons. Professor Slytherin will probably stab anyone who tries to stop that from happening.” Adele smiles. “Not necessarily lethal stabbing, mind. Inconvenient stabbing.”

“Inconvenient stabbing. I like that,” Diana says. Severus quietly judges her for a closet Slytherin, as well. “What about Squibs? Beauxbatons allows them to attend through their collège years, but after that they are encouraged to attend non-magical schools for lycée.”

“Beauxbatons’ lycée is so heavily based in performing actual magic that it’s more of a kindness than an exclusion,” John says. “Keeps a Squib in both worlds for as long as possible, anyway.”

“Yes. Them, too,” Severus answers. “I don’t allow wandwork in Potions until fifth year, regardless, and even then it’s less a necessity and more extensive instruction in what not to do with a wand and a cauldron.”

“What about…” Diana hesitates. The look of deep distrust that flashes through her eyes is so ingrained, Severus doubts it’s even a recognized feeling. “What about adult education?”

Severus leans back in his chair, surprised. “I don’t know. You’d have to ask if it’s being planned for. I’m certainly not opposed; at least an adult student usually knows how to bloody well listen.”

John and Diana share a look. “If a letter arrives for Jessamine this summer and reflects that sort of change, we’ll consider it,” Diana says at last. “I’d like my children to know what it was like to school in the north for every Fawley except for me. But the war… if he is still out there, then no. Absolutely not.”
“I understand.” Severus glances back and forth between them. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“I wasn’t lying when I said it wasn’t fair that I knew so much, and you didn’t,” John replies. “Maybe I want to get it all out of the way, just in case you decide to run for the hills and stay up there. It didn’t take long for me to discover that family’s a bit of a touchy subject in Wizarding Britain.”

“It is, yes,” Severus allows. “But I have to come back—I still have to order fucking glassware to replace all of what was destroyed in my classroom last Friday.”

“Oh, that sounds like a lark,” Diana drawls. “All the storage for magical ingredients, then?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “But for what was safely in the storage cupboard? Every last bit of it.”

“There is a story there, I’m sure.” John looks down at his tumbler and seems disappointed to find it empty. “If you’ve drawn up a list, make sure I have it before you leave. I won’t be able to give you an estimate on getting to it all until I see the damage for myself.”

“It’s practice,” Diana blurts out, and then grimaces. “Sorry, that was rude. I meant, telling you all this, the whole of it—the kids have seen the newspapers, too. It’s a bit obvious that you and John look a fair bit alike.”

“They were curious, wanting to know how that’s possible. Then the bloody Prophet printed your mother’s maiden name, and that tore it. They’re convinced I’m keeping secrets, and what’s worse? I am.” John snorts. “You don’t just come out and say things that’ve been kept quiet for that long. I’ve been trying to figure out since bloody February what I’m going to tell them, but then I have to concern myself with how much the darlings are going to want to meet their only living cousin, and that’s not the sort of decision I can make. It’s not me dealing with their enthusiasm after that—it’s you.”

Adele gives him a sharp nudge with her elbow. “Severus.”

Severus glances down, realizes he’s grabbed the edge of the table in a white-knuckled grip, and lets it go. “I’m sorry. No—listen. Please,” he adds, when both John and Diana look ready to pour forth apologies. “My grandparents disowned my mother for marrying my father, and both of them died shortly after I was born. My father drove away what few family members I knew of on the Snape side before I went to Hogwarts. The Prince family tree had been bearing only one child per generation for at least ten generations by that point, so there was no other family. My father died in September of 1976 of alcohol-induced liver failure, and I was not sorry for the loss in the slightest. He was…” Severus’s eyes flicker to Adele. “He was not a sterling example of a father.”

“That does explain why the papers only mentioned their names, where they were from, dates of birth, and dates of death.” Adele looks far too sympathetic. He would very much like her to stop, because that, in combination with John and Diana’s startled dismay, are not doing his current and annoying emotional turmoil any favors at all.

_You are a Mind Magic practitioner. Act like it_, Severus reminds himself. It helps to shove a great deal of that turmoil away, something he can deal with at a much later date. Never, if he could get away with it.

“My mother died at the age of fifty, and to this day I believe that she did so out of sheer spite,” Severus continues. “Her health was never the best, but no doctor could ever determine a medical cause for such an early death—early for a magician, especially.

“I am badly attempting to explain that I have not had to concern myself with the notion of family of...
any sort for nearly twelve years. I did not come to Stoke-on-Trent expecting to discover family, or to
find that there is a branch of the Prince line remaining not composed of hateful pricks.”

Diana smiles while John laughs. “You are definitely the sort to speak your mind, aren’t you? That’s
all right. I am, too. Bad habit, but I don’t quite have that sly tongue to compensate when I go and put
my foot in it.” John says. “Look. It’s not as if you don’t have my address, given how long you’ve
been sending owls to my shop. When you think you’re ready, you send a letter. If you’re never
going to be ready, then at least let me know so I can tell the kids that they’re to politely avoid you.”

“If they come to Hogwarts, that last part would be a bit difficult.” Severus makes his hands remain
still on the table, for all he wants to tap his fingers, pace, and possibly flee in desperation. “Diana, I
suggest sending an owl addressed to Salazar Deslizarse with your question regarding adult
education. John, I will let you know regarding…family. In the meantime, I need to be certain that
Miss Greenwood here is returned with enough time to prepare for class, not dash off in a rush.”

“And you’re escaping before our kids get back from school,” John realizes, but he doesn’t seem
offended as the four of them stand up. “I understand. It’s a lot to take in.”

John accepts the scroll of glassware replacement requests when Severus hands it over, but then he
holds out his right hand. “I know it wasn’t planned, and it’s not how I’d have done it, either, but I’m
still glad I met you. It’s nice to know that my father’s eldest grandchild is a good man.”

A good man. Severus might still be able to count on both hands the number of times he’s been
referred to as such by anyone aside from Nizar, but he’s about to run out of fingers. “I—thank you,”
he replies, accepting the brief handshake. “I’m glad you also did not inherit any of my grandfather’s
charming personality quirks.”

“Quirks. I read the writing of a few of those for myself. Mum never wanted me to see the letters they
sent each other, but when she had to go into a care home…well. Nothing left to stop me,” John says.
“Pretty sure I got off lucky, not having him in my life.”

“I won’t argue with you in that regard.” Severus debates for a moment. “A care home?”

John nods. “Mum has dementia, the bad sort. She has a good day about once a year now. I count it
excellent if she knows who I am, and that’s not often. She needs medical care full-time. It’s not the
sort of thing any of us are capable of, not with the kids in the house.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” Severus nearly kicks himself when he hesitates too long, again. “If she
raised you, then she would have been worth knowing.”

John’s smile is a lot wider, and certainly kinder, than Severus’s has ever dared to be. “That she was.”

* * * *

After leaving Stoke Turnabout Glassware, Severus takes them straight back to the record shop. After
that visit, he needs the bloody distraction. He wants to think about something entirely unrelated for a
few minutes.

Adele ruins that plan, but at least her reason is good. She is also intelligent enough to cast the Privacy
Charm, which immediately dampens the sounds of others sharing the walkway. “Should we have
warned them, maybe? About You-Know-Who?”
Severus spares her an irritated look. “Given the conversation, it sounded as if they are already aware of the threat.”

“No, I mean…I didn’t sense any wards.”

“I wasn’t aware that you were studying wards, Adele.”

“It seemed the sort of thing a war mage should know about,” Adele responds in a defensive tone. “I didn’t see anything like that, either.”

“They’re not a known family to Wizarding Britain,” Severus says, but he is considering her words.

“Yes, but they are a known magical business, even if everyone else is submitting orders by owl!” Adele insists. “And not every Death Eater that twit has is British. I know I heard French during the Ides of March raids, Severus.”

Severus slows his steps, frowning. “Fuck. He’s already been recruiting overseas.”

“Do you think he ever stopped?” Adele asks.

“Probably not, but it was a lot more difficult to do when he was a deformed and terrifying creature that Pettigrew had to cart about.” Severus growls under his breath. “I wish you’d mentioned that before. Did you recognize anyone?”

“I didn’t, no, but to be honest? Until John brought up Beauxbatons, I’d forgotten about the French bit,” Adele admits. “Too much happened that night. I’m still sorting it out in my head when I have time to devote to that sort of thing.”

“Make extra time,” Severus orders quietly. “Tell me if you need that extra time to be arranged. If you heard French accents, you’ll need to gather up those memories with as much clarity as possible for others to view in a Pensieve. You didn’t recognize those voices, but others might.” He considers sending an owl to Stoke-on-Trent after returning to Hogwarts, but that suddenly feels like it might be inviting trouble. He’ll send a house-elf with a direct message, instead. The difficult part will be wording the offer of extra magical protection on the shop and home without it sounding overly familiar, or familial.

“I’ll do my best—here, Severus?” Adele asks as they stop in front of the record shop. “It’s a bit loud.”

The song playing now isn’t even the same band from before. Severus doesn’t recognize them, either, but they sound annoying. “Such shops usually are.” The bell on the door is brazen and jarring when Severus pushes it open, but the shop is large enough to warrant it if the assistants are working in the back.

Fortunately, he doesn’t have to hunt anyone down. “Good afternoon, mate!” a black-skinned boy says cheerfully. Severus places his age as nineteen, at most, and out of school for good unless he returns to uni at some point. The shop assistant also has neon green hair with black roots, but somehow makes it look normal.

“My name’s Ricky. Anything I can help you find?” Then Ricky spies Adele, and his grin widens. “And can I help you in particular?”

“Your flirting needs work,” Adele replies with a bemused smile. “Might want to talk to the man with the money. I’m just having a look.”
“Sure, then,” Ricky says, undeterred by her lack of enthusiasm. “You’re not the first vamp I’ve had in this shop. What are you looking for? Classic Siouxsie and the Banshees, perhaps?”

“I don’t have the slightest idea who that is. I was more interested in whatever was playing in this shop around 1:30 this afternoon.”

Ricky frowns. “Not certain I recall what specific song was playing, but the album is an import from the States. The band’s called The Smashing Pumpkins. Probably a reference to when people would go out on Hallowe’en and do exactly that, the pricks. It’s a two-CD set.”

“I don’t use CDs. Is it on vinyl?” Severus asks.

“Oh, an audiophile. Gotcha,” Ricky says with a sage nod. Severus wonders what the fuck an audiophile is supposed to be. He probably isn’t one; he’s just technologically two decades behind. “I have one copy. It’s meant for one of my regulars, but he didn’t show up in a timely manner, so as far as I’m concerned, he can ask us to order another in if he gets pissed off about it. Give me a mo,’ and I’ll have it right out.”

Adele walks up to join Severus while Ricky is rummaging around in the back. “I hope you have the money to pay for that, because I certainly don’t.”

Severus glances at her. “Did Hadrian’s Wall send you a credit card via Owl Post?”

“The piece of plastic that’s supposed to be a form of non-magical money on account?” Adele nods. “They explained how to use it, but they also said to save it for emergencies. I’ve got it with me, but I didn’t think record shops counted as an emergency.”

“I can purchase this record as a distraction from what just occurred, or I can attempt to demolish the tomb in which my maternal grandparents reside in a fit of rage using my fists and a signpost. This is an emergency.”

“That poor signpost,” Adele is saying through giggles when Ricky returns. He’s bearing a blue album in his arms thick enough to hold at least three records.

“For the audiophile, then,” Ricky announces, handing it off to Severus.

Severus likes the title immediately, though he’s not certain how Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness relates to the accompanying artwork on the front. Then he turns it over, views the track listing, and nearly shoves the record right back at the shop assistant.

One of the tracks is titled “Lily (My One and Only).” No. Absolutely not. He will figure out how to skip over that, or convince the turntable needle to forget that the song exists.

“You gonna buy that, mate, or break it in half?” Ricky asks in alarm. “Because I’d still like to be able to sell it if you’ve changed your mind!”

Severus relaxes his grip. “It’s…sorry. One of the song titles bears a name I still find upsetting. Does your store accept credit cards, or cash only?”

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“Either’s fine,” Ricky says, appeased. Severus tries not to grimace when the price of the album rings up on the till, but he doesn’t have to worry about paying for it until someone in Hadrian’s Wall does their yearly accounting. Or perhaps he can be convincing regarding the emergency nature of the purchase. He’s caused others to believe far more complicated things.

“Hey, you know…” Ricky pauses with the credit card still in his hand. “If you’re trying out new
sounds, I could make some suggestions.”

“Not today.” Severus pauses. “Though if you would write them down, I do have to return to pick up an order of glassware. Oh, and—” Salazar made the suggestion once, appalled to find that Severus didn’t know the band at all. “Joy Division. If you have anything by them, I’d appreciate seeing them on the list.”

“Oh, see, there’s the vamp part, but with better taste,” Ricky declares. He scribbles away at a piece of paper while Severus reviews the printed receipts before signing his name on the merchant copy.

“Thank you,” Severus says politely as he accepts the bagged album.

Ricky grins and shoves the piece of paper at him. “I’m a fast writer. There’s your suggestions, mate. All of them with an LP release. I’d like to suggest a few more, but you’re too classy for CDs.”

Severus studies the list, aware that Adele is peering around his arm to have a look, as well. Garbage, *Self-Titled*. Tank Girl Official Soundtrack—whatever the hell that is. The Cranberries he heard while in a London record shop in January, but he doesn’t think it was anything from the *No Need to Argue* LP. Portished’s LP of *Dummy*, which has an asterisk and a number one besides it; first album, then. Offspring with an offering called *Smash* that already sounds mindful of the Ramones. White Zombie, also with an asterisk and number one, entitled *Astro Creep: 2000*. “What the hell is White Zombie?”

Ricky shrugs. “They’re the sort of band that you’ll either love or hate the first time you hear them. Not a lot of in between.”

“What do you think of them?” Adele asks.

“Still making up my mind, but love, I dig the green-haired pint-sized girl who’s playing bass for that band. She’s slinging around an instrument almost as big as she is!”

“I’m certain the green hair helps with the appeal,” Severus mutters, reading the rest of the list. Tag Team has an album entitled *Whoomp (There It Is)* that he is immediately suspicious of, but if he hates it, he can foist it off on Adele. If she dislikes it, she might know of a student who will be happy to have a dubious bit of vinyl. Mad Season—he likes the band name already—has an album called *Above*.


The last addition is Smashing Pumpkins’ *Siamese Dream*. “You’re that confident I’ll like this band?”

“If you liked what you heard, then yeah, I’m about one hundred percent on that one,” Ricky says, looking fairly earnest about it.

Severus thinks about it, realizes he hasn’t spent a bloody pence of his own money since January, and gives the list back to Ricky. “All of them, please.” He treats Ricky an innocuous stare when the man looks startled. “Barring incident, I should be back in Stoke by Friday the fifth of April. At worst, I’ll be by on the following Tuesday afternoon. Is that enough time for you to acquire them?”

Ricky nods. “I have some of the imports already, but the rest won’t be that difficult to get ahold of. I can trade around with a few other shops if need be. You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. I can always blame you if every single bit of it is terrible,” Severus responds dryly. Ricky laughs before bidding Severus and the lovely lady a good afternoon.
They leave the shop and head south, right back towards the Apparition point. “Unless you have anything else to attend to,” Severus offers Adele. Her five o’clock class is still a full two hours distant.

Adele’s eyes are already on the shop for ladies’ dresses. “You think I could convince Hadrian’s Wall that I had a clothing emergency?”

“If not, you’ve got a stipend that will cover it,” Severus reminds her.

“Right.” Adele dithers in front of the shop window. “You wouldn’t…mind. Waiting. Would you? I can be quick about it, really!”

Severus rolls his eyes. “I am far more patient than I am given credit for, and I have an album full of liner notes to read. You’ve got at least an hour before I would start encouraging you to leave.” In a lower voice, he says, “I know exactly what your parents are like. Find something that would appall them.”

Adele gives him a bright grin, startles him with a hug, and then darts into the shop. Severus sighs and follows, resigning himself to finding a chair and hiding from this shop’s sales staff until Adele has basked in whatever glory she believes she’s beheld.
“Is there a possibility that Riddle listened to the Death Eaters who were present at Narcissa’s Christmas dinner and dug up Drugo?”

“Even if they did so, Drugo was not that sort of magician.”

After they return to Hogwarts, Severus sits in his office. There is no sound aside from the crackling fire and the intense hush of ancient stone. Even the house-elf chore is done; Filky returned from Stoke-on-Trent with a baffled look and a polite note scribbled on a bit of lined paper: Thank you, but it’s taken care of. He hopes that is John’s script, if only so Severus can at least be reassured that handwriting is not genetic.

He really needs to get that fucking turntable from Cokeworth. Nizar doesn’t mind sharing, but that wasn’t meant to be the point when Severus made a gift of the one he found in London.

Severus breathes out and flings himself back against his chair, scowling. Cokeworth is not that far from Stoke-on-Trent, perhaps an hour and a half by train—two hours during peak times. He once lived a short train ride away from family that is not only closely related, but decent.

He’s never had decent relatives before aside from small Snape cousins he can barely remember. He has no idea what sort of people they grew up to be like, though he hopes they avoided becoming anything like their uncle Tobias.

It’s the first time he’s contemplated the idea of searching for them. He never did before; he’d scrubbed that part of his life out so completely that it wasn’t even a blip of concern.

His father drove the rest of his family away. If they weren’t willing to cope with his nonsense, maybe that means they’re...also decent?

Severus makes a frustrated noise. No. He has enough to cope with in trying to come to terms with a magical half-uncle, a Squib aunt by marriage, and three magical cousins. He casts his Patronus, which is swift to depart once it’s granted a message.

Poppy sends her own Patronus back, a floppy-eared shepherd dog. “No, I’m not busy, Severus. What do you need?”
Severus nearly talks himself out of it before giving up. He is sick to death of this fucking silence. “I need to make a quick visit to the house in Cokeworth. Would you mind waiting downstairs in that icy hovel while I go traipsing around in the attic for five minutes?” He sends the Patronus back to her, hoping it will only take five minutes. He should have put the turntable somewhere obvious.

Poppy answers him by turning the flame green in his office fireplace and requesting permission to step through the Floo. “I haven’t been to your house in ages, dear. I don’t mind taking a quick trip out and back again, especially if we’re avoiding the mess of your chimney by Apparating.”

“Thank you.”

It is, fortunately, a mere ten minutes to retrieve the turntable. The worst of it is waiting to make certain there are no Death Eaters watching the house, lying in wait. He finds evidence of footprints that are several days old, but no indication that any of them were stupid enough to attempt breaking down the wards on his back door.

“Local hooligans, do you think?” Poppy asks when he points out the prints.

“Not with that profile. Hooligans interested in breaking and entering would be more likely to be wearing trainers. Those are boots with the flat sole typical of a magician who wants to turn in place quickly.”

“You should be assisting Nizar, if that so easily occurs to you,” Poppy suggests.

Severus shakes his head. “He is a Defence master for a reason; he already knows. The N.E.W.T. students had an interesting time learning to track specific classmates not only by shoe type, but how they bloody walked.”

The turntable is on a shelf in the attic, coated in a liberal application of dust. Severus draws one finger through it, revealing scuffed clear glass, while trying to remember what had been going through his mind when he’d pulled the turntable from his room and shoved it up here.

Tobias had been in an utter fucking horror of a mood before Severus left for Hogwarts on first September in 1976. Severus had hurriedly stored the turntable up here, along with his entire vinyl collection, out of concern that his father might destroy it the moment Severus boarded the train for London.

Instead, Tobias Snape had continued to ignore the obvious symptoms of jaundice that both his wife and son pointed out during that summer. In the middle of September, Eileen finally needed to call for an ambulance to take the stupid fool to hospital, and there Tobias had done the world a favor by expiring in short order. Severus’’s mother later informed him that the attending physician had insisted upon an autopsy, suspecting foul play based on Eileen’s lack of grief at her husband’s passing. The coroner had rather joyfully concluded that the last time he saw that sort alcohol-riddled liver, the dead man in question had been a ninety-year-old Irishman capable of drinking the neighborhood under the table until his literal dying day.

Severus gathers up the rather pathetic vinyl collection, briefly saddened by dog-eared edges and faded colors. If he’d cast a Preservation Charm on the album covers, they would look new, as most of Salazar’s collection does. He hadn’t thought of it, not then, still a teenager lacking the recognition that time brings destruction in its wake.

Poppy is glad to see him return from the attic. She’s standing by the fireplace, arms crossed, trying not to shiver. “Severus, it’s nearly April. How is this place still such a block of ice? We’re in the south!”
“This house is accomplished at maintaining intolerable temperatures,” Severus replies. He escorts her outside, makes certain the door, wards, and the Fidelius Charm are restored, and then Apparates them both back to Hogwarts. Poppy thanks him for the smooth trip, saying she’s getting spoiled by the war mages’ ability to Apparate anywhere in Britain without difficulty.

Once Severus is alone in his office once more, he drags over a flat-seated wooden chair and puts it next to his desk. The turntable was properly charmed to be powered by magic in 1975, when he finally believed he could cast the spells and not destroy it. The charm for Salazar’s walls-to-speakers conversation is slightly more complicated, but he’s gaining proficiency at casting it. Rather than use magic or ask for an elf’s assistance, he cleans the turntable himself, using a soft cloth. The dust is the worst of it for the glass, though he does contemplate the idea of later repairing the scratches and scuffs with magic. The wooden base for the turntable is not happy about twenty years of storage, but he keeps beeswax in his office. He’ll let that soak in over the next few days before attempting anything more.

Severus removes the annoying cellophane from The Smashing Pumpkins album, Banishes the plastic, and then glances at the track listings. None of the titles offer a hint about what song he first heard, and Adele’s swift shopping job interrupted his perusal of the liner notes. He pulls out the first of three LPs and puts the needle down for the first track—the title track, which proves to be an instrumental piece.

While he’s listening, he sorts through the stack of vinyl he rescued from the attic. It’s been nearly twenty years since he’s looked at any of these albums, and some he’d forgotten about completely. Pink Floyd’s Wish You Were Here was his favorite that last year. Its cover is so worn that the art is starting to fade into the white cardstock it’s pressed on. He purchased David Bowie’s Diamond Dogs in 1974, after the man well and truly went glam. Bowie’s 1970 pressing of Man Who Sold the World just makes Severus feel bitter.

He has his own copy of Jefferson Airplane Surrealistic Pillow, and thus has the infamous “White Rabbit” back. The album is an import; he and Lily pooled their money to purchase it after discovering that the UK release was composed of half of the new album’s tracks, and the rest were older songs from the band’s first Stateside release.

He’d all but forgotten the odd intensity of “Bohemian Rhapsody” on Queen’s A Night at the Opera until he spies the track title and is abruptly reminded of it. Alice Cooper and Billion Dollar Babies. Four different Rolling Stones albums: Goat’s Head Soup (not his favorite), Let it Bleed, Aftermath, and Beggars Banquet. He has a newfound appreciation for “Paint it Black” and “Sympathy for the Devil” but has to read the track listings to remember which albums they’re on.

He’s not certain he can stand the idea of listening to “Desperado” on the Eagles Greatest Hits album. Lily had liked it too much. Simon and Garfunkel’s Sounds of Silence might be even worse.

Led Zeppelin and Presence. The first album from the Ramones in 1976; he knows there are more, but nothing else. Fleetwood Mac’s first album he purchased in 1975, though he can’t recall if there is anything on it he would still willingly listen to. He has a first pressing of Black Sabbath’s Paranoid by sheer gall of stealing a copy, as the local record shop wouldn’t sell it to anyone under the age of twelve. Pricks.

Nizar finds Severus in his office after the dinner hour is over. “Please tell me you ate dinner,” he says. “If you’re allowed to harangue myself about a meal, I can return the favor.” Then he pauses and cocks his head, listening. “Who is this?”

“They’re called The Smashing Pumpkins, a band from the States.” It took Severus a while to find the
song he’d initially heard in Stoke-on-Trent. He’s listened to it three times now. “This particular track
is titled “1979.”

“And we don’t know just where our bones will rest
To dust I guess
Forgotten and absorbed into the earth below
Double cross the vacant and the bored
They’re not sure just what we have in the store
Morphine city slippin’ dues, down to see that
We don’t even care, as restless as we are
We feel the pull in the land of a thousand guilts
And poured cement, lamented and assured
To the lights and towns below
Faster than the speed of sound
Faster than we thought we’d go, beneath the sound of hope.”

Nizar sits down on the other side of Severus’s desk, glancing at the half-eaten dinner tray and the
small pile of faded, dog-eared vinyl. “You look as if you’ve had an interesting afternoon. Sounds it,
too, if that’s the sort of music you’re looking for.”

Severus rests his hand on the open album cover, his fingertips just below the lyrics for the song in
question. “I did, yes.”

“Adele mentioned one record purchase, and none of them were second-hand,” Nizar says.

“I didn’t realize you’d sent her along as a nanny.”

“No.” Nizar sounds amused by the snide accusation. “She always promised when the day came that
she finally recognized she was being flirted with, without anyone needing to point it out, she’d
immediately let me know. She mentioned that you also had an upsetting visit with the glassmith, but
said that was your tale, not hers.”

“I took Poppy on my brief trip to Cokeworth. I hadn’t planned to go until I returned here this
afternoon and realized I couldn’t tolerate the idea of sitting in a silent castle for the rest of the
afternoon.” The song is giving way to the next track, which isn’t to his taste. Severus lifts the needle
and adjusts it so that the album begins playing “By Starlight” instead. Better.

“I can leave,” Nizar offers. It makes Severus realize he’s been sitting there in utter silence. The next
track is already playing. “Cupid De Locke” reminds him of psychedelic punk.

“That isn’t necessary.” Severus folds up the album cover and sets it aside. “John R. Jones. Ring a
bell?”

“It has not been that long since February, and my memory problems are of an entirely different era,”
Nizar responds dryly. “Yes. Silvanus’s little indiscretion.”

“John Richard Jones had his family named changed to Prince by a rightfully spiteful mother at age
eleven, who paid the bribes which keep that change out of every British magical registry. He
schooled at Beauxbatons, graduated with the second-highest honor it’s possible to achieve,
completed a five-year apprenticeship for glassmaking in Andalucía, moved back to his hometown of
Stoke-on-Trent, married a Squib of the Fawley line, and now has three magical children. Oh, and since he only used the business name on correspondence, I discovered today that I’ve been ordering my bloody magical-grade laboratory glassware from my own uncle for the last decade.”

Nizar stares at him. “Well, that must have been fucking awkward.”

Severus slumps back in his chair. “Yes, it is. It is exceptionally fucking awkward!” He manages to summarize the rest of the meeting in the Prince home—that’s even more awkward, oh God—without losing any more of his composure.

As long as Severus is lying to himself about composure, he’s also going to believe, just for a moment, that Voldemort is already dead and the war ended yesterday.

“What are you going to do?” Nizar asks. Dumbledore would prod him about his feelings and be pleased about it all, probably in hopes of using the newest Prince children as yet more fucking chess pieces. Minerva would offer reserved sympathy, which he doesn’t want right now. Filius would plot aloud how to best convince the next generation of Princes to school in Hogwarts, so he has more intelligent students to teach. (Severus can’t really blame him for that sort of plotting.) Pomona would be happy for Severus, and it’s too soon for that.

Nizar does none of those things. He knows Severus well, and is aware of just how much this is fucking up Severus’s entire view of the world. He prefers his life be understandable, even when it’s been complicated by a one-thousand-year-old Slytherin…who also happens to be the son of his best friend and two men he used to bloody hate.

Fuck, when put that way, Severus has no idea what he’s so upset about. The sudden existence of a glass-making uncle is far less fucking complicated.

When the hell did he stop hating Sirius Black, anyway? This is not the sort of thing that should have passed his notice!

Nizar bursts out laughing. Severus glares at him. “I’m sorry!” Nizar gasps through laughter. “It’s just—your face! There was just such a succession of expressions! I should put that in a Pensieve just so you can view it for yourself.”

Severus sighs. “Fuck you. Please do so. I was just realizing that the very fact that I’m dating you is far more complicated than discovering secret relatives living in the same area of England I bloody grew up in.”

Nizar grins. “How far away?”

“Stoke-on-Trent is northwest of Birmingham. Cokeworth is southwest. It’s about two hours by train, at most.” Severus leans over and removes the needle when the record ends. He switches the turntable off, lifts the album, and slides it into the paper sleeve that, thankfully, still seems to be standard protection for vinyl. He’s about to pick up the album cover to finish putting it away when he realizes Nizar is staring at him, head cocked to one side. “What?”

Nizar gives him a baffled look. “Can you not hear that?”

Severus puts everything down, sits in his chair, and stills himself to listen. The only thing that comes to his ears is the sound of two men breathing. “No.”

He feels something, though. It’s so akin to the sensation of falling that he instinctively reaches out to grip the edge of his desk, wondering if Longbottom spilled another plant-based Vanishing Potion in his office.
He isn’t falling. The floor is still where it belongs.

The last thing he hears is Nizar whispering in pain-shocked Castilian.

* * * * *

Nizar has never felt anything like this. It’s like ants under the skin, his core being frozen, magic turned to electricity. It makes him feel as if the earth beneath his feet no longer exists.

It takes several minutes to realize he is lying on the floor of Severus’s office, staring at the large central column of Severus’s desk. He is still gasping for breath and trembling, with no bloody idea what just happened.

Severus is lying on the ground on the other side of his desk. Nizar might be conscious, but he isn’t. It would have been nice if Nizar could have been unconscious for the worst of it, too. Whatever it was, anyway.

What the fuck is going on?

Hogwarts is bolstering him, murmuring in her wordless way. She feels concern and anger and rage on behalf of her guardians.

Guardians. Plural. More than one.

The Heads of House? Nizar flashes on images of everyone connected to the school’s magic.

The castle responds, but not the way he expects. She shows him Severus. Filius. Salazar. Adele. There is a pause in which he can strongly feel her confusion before she then shares brief images of Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Fleur Delacour, and Bill Weasley.

The war mages. Why?

Nizar tries to stand up and can’t even come close. He crawls his way over to Severus instead. He touches his wand, feeling a stir of nausea at the idea of casting magic right now. No Diagnostic Charms, then. Bugger.

He swallows and presses his fingers against Severus’s throat. Faster pulse rate. Shallow breathing. Severus’s normally pale skin is always a blotchy ash-violet if he is ill, and that is the color beginning to show beneath his eyes.

Nizar suspects he doesn’t look much better. The reason he’s awake is not due to Hogwarts alone, though he senses she tried hard to prevent this from happening to those within her walls. It’s his magical ties to the Brae lands anchoring him to consciousness, and Hogwarts is upon that land. The strength of one is reinforcing the strength of the other.

The war mages. Land.

Someone attempted to sunder their magical ties to the kingdom. That failed—he thinks. Nizar can’t yet tell because his sense of the land beyond that of Brae is gone. He can’t find the spark of any of the multitudes who live on this island.

It’s like suddenly existing in a void.
Panic later. Don’t panic now. Kill the walking corpse later. Severus needs help now, and so does—

Then he nearly does panic, and has to fight to keep his breathing steady. Salazar is an Earth-Speaker.

Salazar also can’t fucking die, Nizar reminds himself. The panic retreats, lurking in the background. Later for that. He has to—he can’t cast a Patronus, either. Fuck.

Nizar places his hand on Hogwarts’ stone. She reaches back at once and reads his intent. Minerva is the one who has been tied to the magic longest. The castle will be able to tell her where to go.

He is lying next to Severus, doing nothing more than concentrating on his breathing, when Minerva Apparates into the room. “Nizar, what is—oh, my God!” She rushes over to them, wide-eyed. “The same thing has happened to Salazar! I’d only just called for Poppy when the castle spoke to me!”


“The war mages.” Minerva gets out her wand and casts her Patronus, but before she ends the charm, she performs an interesting flick that adds an extra bit of magic to the spell. The result is not one Patronus, but six cats waiting to be messengers. “What should I tell the assistance I’m about to conscript?”

“Tell them to…” Nizar swallows again when his mouth insists on being desert-parched. “Bring everyone here. Hospital wing. No Apparating anyone. If the fucker intends anything else, I still hold Brae.”

Minerva glances at him. “Is that why you’re still conscious?” After he nods, she addresses each Patronus in turn. Pomona is asked to go after Adele, with Minerva reminding Pomona that she doesn’t need the password for the Slytherin Common Room, just a Prefect or a determined castle on her side. Aurora is asked to see to Filius. Kingsley is selected for Tonks if she’s at the Ministry. Arthur is chosen for Bill and Fleur. Sirius is the obvious choice for Remus—and for Tonks, if she’s already at Twelve Grimmauld Place for the evening.

“What’s our biggest danger right now, aside from You-Know-Who?” Minerva asks once all the Patroni are gone.

“Magical shock.” Nizar can feel it like an impending threat, and it’s taking a great deal of effort to keep it at bay. He can’t. Not until he knows everyone else is alive. This would have been a horrific shock, especially to those still adjusting to the magic—

“Oh, gods. Filius. Goblins have strong ties to the earth.”

“It will be worse for him, then.” Minerva nods grimly. “My apologies, but you’ll both have to suffer the indignity of being levitated to the hospital wing.”

Nizar lets his head fall back and closes his eyes. “I don’t care.” He has too many other fears to dwell on to be all that concerned with dignity.

He listens to the students react to the sight of Minerva floating them through the dungeon corridor, sounds that only get louder when they get to the ground floor. He ignores them, trying to sort through possibility even as his head begins to ache like fucking blazes. That can’t have been the assassination of Queen Elizabeth. Death of a monarch won’t sever a war mage’s ties to the kingdom. This wasn’t an individual attack; he fell at the same time as Severus.

Think, gods all, think!
“Nizar?” He hears Poppy’s voice, and then someone is shining a bright light into his eyes.

He shrieks in response and covers his eyes with both arms. “This new migraine is not helping with the thinking!”

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t realize you were still conscious,” Poppy apologizes. “You’re on the verge of magical shock, you know.”

“Yes. Completely aware. It can fuck right off until I know everyone is here and alive.”

Poppy clucks her tongue at his language. She doesn’t mind unless they’re in the hospital wing, so Minerva must have gotten them there.

He has to have lost consciousness for a few minutes to not notice being put in a bed. Gods, this is not going to be pleasant.

“I’ve sent for assistance from St. Mungo’s,” Poppy says. “I can’t treat nine cases of magical shock on my own.”

“Understandable. Minerva?” He’s not going to open his eyes again right now. There is torchlight in the hospital wing that he firmly suspects would hurt a great deal.

“Right here, Nizar. Sirius is Flooing over with Remus, and Kingsley is bringing Tonks—she was at home, but he went straight over,” Minerva explains. “Werewolves have an earth affinity too, Nizar.”

“Right.” He knows that. Usually. “Remus is probably not going to be a thrilling person to be around.”

“Given that the full moon is next Wednesday?” Minerva makes a sound of agreement. “Nizar: what happened?”

“Not sure how—trust me, definitely trying to figure that out. The walking corpse cut the war mages off from their sense of this kingdom. That sense is tied to the land. The earth.” Nizar hesitates. “If Salazar could die, the shock of it might have killed him.”

“Oh, God.” Minerva draws in a deep breath. “Is this repairable?”

“Yes. Salazar’s—that’s a natural gift. It will heal itself. So will Filius, and Remus. The rest…” Nizar thinks about it. “If this is a magical block, those won’t hold for long. If it was a severance… rededication, probably, by Her Majesty. Everyone would go through the adjustment period again.”

“I have an unconscious werewolf and I’m very much trying not to panic about it!” Sirius shouts a few moments later. “Tell me where to put him, and then tell me what the entire hell is going on!”

“Stop shouting!” Poppy retorts, and then directs Sirius to a bed somewhere to Nizar’s left. Nizar keeps his eyes covered with his left arm and then reaches out to the right. He finds the next bed easily, along with familiar fabric. Severus is there, then. Good.

“Salazar is in the bed to your left,” Minerva tells him quietly. Nizar thanks her with a smile.

Kingsley is only a minute behind Sirius. “I didn’t know Tonks had brown hair,” he comments in a mild voice. He sounds leagues calmer than Sirius. “I’ve never seen it before. Where do I put her, Poppy?”

“Right there next to Remus, that’ll do,” Poppy says. “Oh, my. Aurora?”
“At first, I thought he wasn’t breathing,” Aurora whispers, and Nizar tries not to feel guilt over something that is most decidedly not his doing. Aside from asking Filius to take the vows to the kingdom.

Still not his fault. Mostly.

“I’ve got Miss Greenwood!” Pomona shuffles in next, sounding as if she’s bearing a weight. Carrying instead of levitating. It’s an interesting choice for a magician, denotes personal caring.

Pomona has always cared. She just had to get used to having a painting walking about as a person.

Oh, he’s losing it. He can tell by his own thoughts.

He still doesn’t know how the fuck the walking corpse did this, and that’s making him angry.

Bill and Fleur. He can wait for them. He’ll manage, by all the fucking gods.

“Nizar?” That’s Sirius, sounding as if he’s leaning down close to him. Worried.

“Not dead, just really sarding angry,” Nizar replies. “I’m tied to Brae and Hogwarts, and that’s the only reason you’re talking to me. At least for the moment. I just need to know that everyone is still alive.”

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“Well…” Sirius lets out a sigh. “Filius isn’t conscious and looks like he might prefer to be dead, but the emergency crew from St. Mungo’s has him in their clutches. He’ll live, but I don’t think he’s going to be springing back from this. Remus shouted and then dropped face-first onto my dinner table, Nizar.”

“Bruised and magically shocked. He’ll be thrilled.” That will be such a wonderful cranky werewolf to deal with. “Tonks?”

“Was sitting down,” Sirius assures him. “I’m just glad she wasn’t on the stairs. You’re going to live, right?”

“Sirius, I’m currently furious. What do you think?”

Sirius chuckles. The sound is gentle. It feels…comforting. Maybe even familiar, which is fucking odd. “That you’ll survive out of spite. Just like a Black.”

He would argue the point, but it was a properly bonded marriage. It was once magically true, if not biologically. “Whatever. When I pass out, it’s going to be a heavy blow, Sirius.”

Sirius rests his hand on Nizar’s knee. “How bad?”

“If my heart stops, tell them to make it go again. Same with breathing.” Nizar considers it. “Or anything else, really.”

Sirius swears under his breath. “Because you’ve been tied to the land for the longest.”

“Brae will help. Voldemort didn’t go for—” Oh, fuck no. Nizar noticed that. He could feel it bounce right off Hogwarts’ wards. “Soooo, Voldemort—” Another bounce; fuck! “—managed to put a Taboo Curse on his name near the end of the last war, didn’t he?”

“He did, yes, and—”

Whatever Sirius was about to say is lost to frantic shouting near the entrance of the hospital wing.
“You don’t fucking understand!” That’s Draco. Draco most often chooses not to swear, teachers or no teachers, unless he is highly upset.

Higgs chimes in: “Every single one of the Marked idiots is on the ground, too!”

Applebee: “In every bloody House! That includes bloody Fleet!”

“I feel like shit,” Warrington announces in a woozy-sounding voice. “Someone please let me fall down in a bed and leave me to die, okay?”

Oh, great. Things did get worse.

Next is Arthur: “I’ve got Bill—what the hell?”

Someone else is yelling in French, sounding truly pissed off, and that person is not Fleur. Nizar thinks Fleur mentioned an aunt. If an unmated Veela just walked into this school while very angry, no one with the preference for women is going to be sexually distracted. They’ll want to go to war, which will be as fun to deal with as the cranky werewolf.

“Sirius?”

Sirius’s grip on his knee tightens. “I’m right here, Nizar.”

“Warn everyone. The Taboo is active again.” Then he steps back, into his own mind, and regards the sheer amount of shock that he’s been holding back.

Everyone is still alive. There are people here to see to it that they remain that way.

Nizar sighs and allows that mental dam to break. At least this time, he loses consciousness almost instantly.

* * * * *

Nizar opens his eyes, recognizes the hospital ceiling overhead, and closes his eyes again. No, absolutely not.

“Wake up, pendejo,” Salazar mutters from his bedside. “If I’m to suffer a magical hangover, you can bloody well join me.”

“Grgh,” Nizar retorts in a fit of brilliance.

“Oh, that was elegant.” Salazar shifts beside him. “If you get up, hermanito, there is tea.”

Tea. That might be worth it. He tries to sit up, rolls over onto his side, and comes very close to vomiting directly onto the floor.

He wakes up again later to voices. Salazar and Severus. “That’s as far as he made it?” Severus is asking. He sounds tired. Amused, but tired.

“He managed better than my first attempt,” Salazar replies.

“Did you vomit?” Nizar slurs the question against the mattress.
“Disastrously so,” Salazar admits. “Nizar. You awoke Wednesday afternoon. It is now Wednesday evening, and you’re terrifying the life out of Poppy Pomfrey.”

Nizar lifts his head and regrets it. The pounding ache he recalls from last night is now horrific. “It’s fucking Wednesday?”

“Late Wednesday,” Salazar replies. He’s wearing a hospital dressing gown over what had been Tuesday’s linen shirt and cotton trousers, he hasn’t shaved, and his short hair is sticking up on one side like it’s been glued that way. He also has dark crescents beneath his eyes and a grey cast to his skin. “We all feel like shit, little brother, but you’re the one who had to go and be special about it.”

Nizar glares at him. “I’ve been bound to this land for over a thousand years, so fuck you, and where is the tea?”

“Winky is bringing the tea!” Nizar shifts in place so he can look at the elf. She’s beaming at him while holding a tray laden only with a single cup of tea, no sugar, no milk, no honey, and a cup of some sort of steaming broth. “The healers and mediwitches and mediwizards insist that everyone be very careful with what they eat after suffering magical shock,” Winky tells him. “Remus Lupin didn’t listen, and it made him ill, so the Protector will listen!”

“I’ll be good. Give me the tea. Please.” Winky nods, appeased, and waits for Nizar to sit up so she can place the tray over his lap. He’s still slouched more than sitting, but close enough.

“How did you know about the Taboo Curse’s reactivation?” Severus asks once Nizar manages to drink half the tea. He has to stop, or the tannic acid will make him ill. At least now he feels like he could string sentences together in coherent fashion. “It was a well-timed warning, but how did you know?”

“I felt a threat response bouncing off the wards before I passed out. Considering that magical bounce happened only when I said the walking corpse’s name…” Nizar shrugs and sips at the mystery broth. Salted broth made from cow bone. Bless the elves for remembering that salt helps, not hinders, when a magician needs to put themselves back together. “Noseless Arsehole drained the Marked students of their magic, didn’t he?”

“How the hell did you know that?”

Nizar looks up at Severus, who is wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown rather than what Salazar did with his clothing. It makes Nizar suspect that Poppy was afraid to Transfigure Salazar’s clothes for fear of ruining them. He glances down, realizes he’s wearing his linen shirt but lacking his robes, and considers it a good guess. “The students had just come to tell everyone what happened before I passed out. They said every Marked student dropped when we did, though I’d wager it was about a minute or so before that.”

Severus gingerly sits down on the bed on Nizar’s right side and nods. He is pale instead of the more concerning ashy-violet, but there are still fading bruises beneath his eyes. “All of the Marked idiots but for Warrington are in the wing downstairs. It’s the first time Poppy has ever needed to use that part of the school hospital, but she didn’t want to keep our fragile selves in the same area as the fragile dunderheads.”

Nizar scowls down at the bone broth, which doesn’t deserve his ire. “At least he didn’t kill them. If he’d drained them dry of their magic, they would have dropped dead instead of dropping unconscious.”

“Which is a fact I am determined to make clear to them,” Severus growls. “Volde—” He halts and
swears viciously. “I’m glad that the stupid Taboo Curse doesn’t seem to work within Hogwarts, but now that I’m finally in the habit of saying the bastard’s name, I have to resort back to stupid epithets!”

“You’re not recognizing the presented opportunity.” Nizar gives the tea another chance. Better; he feels like he could drink the rest and not regret it.

“You-Know-Who inspired fear. Dread. Fear of the name became fear of the phrases used to describe him,” Salazar murmurs. “Of course, the idiot never thought to place a curse on the phrases unique to him.”

When Severus only glares at them in consternation, Nizar smiles. “Severus, the Taboo Curse might be annoying, but the walking corpse has just granted us the means to constantly make fun of the stupid prick. I’m rather fond of the Weasley twins’ chosen epithet of Ol’ Volde.”

Severus looks at Nizar as if he’s sprouted two heads before he finally begins to smile. “No fear.”

“Not for that walking noseless corpse. I refuse.” Nizar looks sadly down at his now-empty tea cup. Maybe the elves will take pity on him and bring more. “How is everyone else doing?”

“Filius is still unconscious, and I think he will be for a while,” Salazar replies. “Gods know I’m not certain how I’m managing to be awake right now. Remus Lupin did exactly as Winky said, corrected his behavior, and then passed out again. Fleur Delacour is in such a temper that I think even her beloved fiancé is hiding from her.”

“Because Veela are water-linked.” Nizar lets his head thump back against the railing of the hospital bed. “And water is strongly tied to the earth. Fuck.”

“Bill Weasley decided to put truth to Minerva’s statements about Weasleys and Prewetts being sturdy. He regained consciousness before any of us,” Severus grumbles. “I’m envious, as I still feel like I was run over by a fucking lorry.”

“Adele is distressed and angry, but like the others who are not tied to the earth, merely feels the exhaustion brought on by the shock of it all,” Salazar says. “And here is Tonks to reassure you of her continued well-being.”

Tonks nods and wanders over to sit at the foot of Nizar’s bed. Her eyes are a solid wall of pure brown instead of the colors he’s used to seeing. Her hair is a very dark ashy brown with hints of violet and blue lurking beneath—natural colors, not altered. Her nose is a bit different, too.

“There is nothing wrong with a snub nose, and I take offence,” Nizar says.

She touches the end of her nose with a wry smile. “I never liked it. Always thought it made me look daft. Remus saw it before he went and passed out again, declared it cute as a button, and is insulted that I’ve never show him my real nose. I’m a bloody Metamorphmagus. Any nose is my real nose!”

“He’ll get over it. How do you feel?” Nizar asks. His ferocious headache hasn’t abated in the slightest, but he suspects it will be with him for a while yet.

“Like I’ve been smashed by a lorry,” Tonks replies, echoing Severus’s rather apt description. “I came over when I heard your voice, since I’m wondering if whatever Twit Riddle did means I’m not a war mage any longer.”

“Twit Riddle.” Salazar looks viciously pleased by the epithet. “I like that one.”
Nizar shakes his head. “You’re a war mage because you swore an oath to the Crown to defend the kingdom that resides on this isle. Whatever Voldemort did doesn’t change that.”

Tonks wrinkles her nose. “It always worries me when you lot don’t know what he’s done.”

“It should. Volde—fuck, now I want to stab him just for the inconvenience of that!” Nizar snaps. “That noseless fucking arsehole would most likely have needed to find someone who knew earth magics. The old sort, the shit you do not fuck with.”

“Old magic.” Severus is quiet for a moment. “Is there a possibility that Riddle listened to the Death Eaters who were present at Narcissa’s Christmas dinner and dug up Drugo?”

Nizar’s nails rake across the metal tray in instinctive response. “Even if they did so, Drugo was not that sort of magician.”

“They did dig him up.”

Nizar stares at his brother in angry shock. “What? When? And when the fuck were you going to inform me?”

“There wasn’t much sense to it, not when they dug him up only to rather promptly bury him again,” Salazar explains, sighing. “One of the Underground witnessed the temporary disinterment. It seems Twit Riddle was expecting a Preserved and cursed living magician he might learn from, but Preservation of the body was not your intent when you put him there, little brother.”

“Ew.” Tonks looks disturbed. “I’d very much like to hear this story proper, but later. In the meantime: was there anything left of this cursed man?”

“After nearly one thousand years of living in a barrow? I’m told he was but rags and a skeleton, and within that skeleton was a magical ball of screaming insanity. It has such intensity that even the non-magical can hear it,” Salazar says. “I have to admit that when I first verified Drugo was still making noise, the way in which he could still be doing so didn’t even occur to me.”

Nizar exclaims in wordless joy when his teacup refills itself. Still no sugar or honey, but he doesn’t care. He once mentioned to Severus that tea seemed to help a headache, and Severus explained that caffeine was the cause, though other elements were also in play. It probably won’t help with this particular headache, but the tea isn’t going to hinder him, either.

“Oh, I could go for more of that,” Tonks says, and squeaks in glee when a house-elf pops in next to her with a laden tray. “Thank you!”

Ancient Kreacher manages his version of a smile. “The daughter of the House of Black is welcome, even if she is a Half-blood daughter.” He vanishes after Severus and Salazar take the remaining cups of tea.

“Wait. That was…Kreacher?” Tonks blinks in disbelief. “But he looked—”

“Less miserably depressed?” Salazar releases a tired chuckle. “He’s with his family again, Tonks. He loved the Black household, but there are other elves in this castle who share his bloodline, and he’d forgotten them all until they met again.”

Bill joins them a moment later, holding a cup of tea and dragging his own chair over to sit in. “Can I hide with you lot here? Fleur is calming down, but calm is relative. By the way, it seems a woman who is one-quarter Veela really can partially transform into the pants-wetting version her grandmother can pull off.”
“How are things at home?” Severus asks in a neutral voice.

Bill rolls his eyes. “I’m so glad it was Dad who was at home and not Mum. She would have lost her bloody mind over what happened, maybe even to the point of trying to insist I ask the Queen to take it back. Which I won’t, by the way. Unless it’s already been taken back?”

Nizar is beginning to realize that all the war mages are going to need to speak together, or he’s going to be answering the same questions over and over again. “Unless you rescind your vows, you’re still a war mage. I just woke up, Bill. I don’t know yet if it was a true severing of our link to the kingdom, or just a temporary block. Just…please let the other questions wait until we’re all capable of sitting down together. I have such a fucking headache.”

“How about a different question, then?” Tonks is looking at Salazar. “If you don’t mind.”

“That depends entirely upon the question, darling,” Salazar replies. “I don’t feel much better than my brother, though I’m grateful to lack what sounds to be a horrific migraine.”

“Well…” Tonks twitches her nose until it resumes her preferred shape. “Sorry, needed to get that out of the way before it drove me mental. You told us in January when you decided to so charmingly slip out of the woodwork—” Bill snorts and coughs out startled laughter. “—that you were a master of Divination, a Seer, and you realized that Twit Riddle was going to threaten the school a thousand years after the Founding. You, the other Founders, and Hogwarts’ Protector here sat down and determined how to best deal with it, by Preservation portrait and by you…being a nutter, really,” Tonks adds, the corner of her mouth turning up with a smile. “I’ve been wondering why you waited so long. Why not do something about that madman during the first war?”

Salazar gives her a thoughtful look that Nizar doesn’t understand. He is suspecting Tonks of trying to ask something else entirely, but Nizar has no idea what that might be. “We were working against Twit Riddle during the first war. The Underground began with only me, but by 1975 there were several of us. I’d saved them all from the Twit, collecting those who would be spies. In truth, I was saving them from others, as well, if they were Death Eaters who’d changed their spots. Not everyone had a patron like Dumbledore to stand against the fury of the Order.”

Tonks gives Severus a curious look; he nods in response. “There were some who would have happily seen me dead on the ground when Dumbledore introduced me to a few select members of the Order in July of 1980. Dearborn was one of those who stood between me and Alastor Moody’s fucking wand. It was, unfortunately, one of the last acts he would perform before Riddle’s people…” Severus looks discomfited. “Rosier Junior claimed to be the one to kill Dearborn. Moody has never been ashamed to admit that he killed Rosier in direct retaliation.”

“Every single one of us passed information on to the Ministry for as long as the M.L.E. kept a foothold, and then onto the Order of the Phoenix when it became clear that the Ministry was faltering,” Salazar continues. “An Underground member, who regretfully died afterwards, managed to successfully poison Twit Riddle. The Twit then did us all the inconvenience of continuing to live without the slightest hint of difficulty. That led to the eventual recognition of the Horcrux problem, but without knowing where those well-guarded secrets were kept? There would be no destroying him, not then. I knew if I had any hope at all of destroying the bane of my bloodline, I’d need my brother at my side. That meant a wait of a further twenty years.”


Salazar smiles. “You already know the answer to that.”
“Harry,” Bill says quietly. “Because Harry is supposed to defeat him.”

“In regards to his defeat? In a sense,” Salazar replies. “Harry Potter revealed that Twit Riddle’s own Horcruxes made him both vulnerable and invulnerable. By turning a child into a living soul jar, Riddle weakened himself so utterly that he discorporated in a rather messy explosion…but while still incorporeal, Riddle could not be killed, even if we’d uncovered and destroyed all of his other Horcruxes during that time.”

“It’s like the Dementor problem,” Nizar says, and immediately has Tonks and Bill’s undivided attention. “Let me guess: Dumbledore couldn’t be bothered to discuss this during last Saturday’s Order meeting.”

“Nope, what Dementor problem, tell, tell, tell!” Tonks demands excitedly.

“They’re soul shards without physical forms to destroy,” Nizar explains. “You can’t use Mind Magic, Fiendfyre, or basilisk venom against a soul shard that has no corporeal form. The walking corpse would have presented the same problem. No body, no way to destroy that wandering bit of soul.”

“No way to destroy him until he made himself weak again with a physical body last summer.” Bill leans back in his chair. “Huh. I wonder if he realized the danger of that.”

“Probably not. He spends far too much time droning on about his own importance,” Salazar responds dryly. “He can’t talk everyone to death by means of dull speeches without a mouth to do such with.”

Nizar has no idea what is said after that. He knows there was further conversation, but since he fell asleep soon afterwards, he can’t recall any of it.

He only knows he fell asleep because he wakes up to a much darker hospital with his right hand clasped over his forehead, swearing aloud. The migraine is still with him, and now it’s decided to live in a single spot in his head instead of causing him to ache all over.

Fuck, he thought he felt terrible before. This concentrated agony is worse.

It also *itches*. It’s not enough to be in pain, oh, no. He also has to itch in a place that is impossible to bloody scratch!

“Please stop trying to tear the skin from your face,” Severus instructs sternly, gripping Nizar’s right hand at the wrist. “What is wrong with you?”

“Fuck off!” Nizar retorts. He really intended that to be louder, but the words emerge as a pathetic whimper instead. “You don’t have bloody scar tissue in your mind that is itching and announcing how angry it is with existence!”

“Why would you—” Severus falls silent for a moment. “Wait here. Stop scratching at your face or I’ll immobilize you.”

Nizar forces his fingernails to stop digging into his flesh. “Happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Severus drawls, and stalks off.

Nizar closes his eyes and prods at that itching, empty spot in his mind. It’s annoying to look at, to know what’s meant to be there instead of this gaping hole. It kept him from paying any attention to the fucking mental scar—he didn’t even recognize its presence after the portrait’s destruction until he
received a sudden and very much unwanted reminder.

Scars such as these remember what they used to be. Bloody hell, no wonder he had such a horrible reaction to touching Rowena’s corrupted diadem. *Like seeks like* is putting it fucking mildly. If he’d been fool enough to open the Horcrux locket, the result would have been the same.

“Little brother, what’s wrong?”

Nizar forces his left eye open so he can glare up at Salazar. “There is a fucking hole in my head reminding me that it is there and that those sorts of scars *do not heal.*”

“Yes, but it’s been there for—” Salazar sighs. “You were storing your awareness of land and people for the war mage title within that empty space, weren’t you?”

“Oh course I fucking well did! If you had an empty spot in your head, you’d put it to similar use!” Nizar returns to trying not to dig his nails into his forehead. “It’s accustomed to being used that way, too, and it’s angry because there is once again nothing there to occupy that space. Now I well and truly want that stupid walking corpse to be fucking dead!”

Salazar kneels down next to his bed. “*Hermanito*, you are a master of Mind Magic. Wall off that entire bloody section of your mind before you end up trying to blind yourself.”

“Fuck, I’m stupid,” Nizar moans, and blinks until he’s back inside his own head, regarding the angry scar. It’s not the best wall he’s ever built, but it filters out the worst of that sharp and itchy agony.

Salazar is resting his hand on Nizar’s face when he focuses outward again. “Better?”

“Yes.” Nizar vaguely considers the idea of vomiting, but he’ll save that for later. He would have been pleased to live the rest of his life without seeing that scar damage again. “Still want him dead.”

“As do I.” Salazar helps him to sit up. “Toilet?”

Nizar winces as he realizes that he’s probably needed that sort of trip for quite a while. “Yes. Even if you have to drag me.”

Fortunately, Salazar doesn’t have to do so, but Nizar is still shaky enough to need support for the entire journey. He is aware that Severus ghosts along in their wake like a pale shadow, but they both wait outside the hospital bathroom when Nizar grumpily insists that he is not going to be falling into a toilet bowl, thank you.

He cleans his hands, washes his face and neck, and then digs around on a shelf devoted to single-use potions and balms. The balm for simple flesh wounds stings as he applies it to the welts he left on his face, but the redness begins to fade at once.

He is no longer in as much pain, but walls do not mean he suddenly lacks an awareness of the fucking hole in his thoughts. It’s like dealing with an empty tooth socket, an annoyance he encountered in his late twenties. Some arsehole’s fist decided the last upper and lower molar at the back end of Nizar’s jaw needed to be removed from his face. There was such a length of time between the resulting fight and seeing Helga afterwards that the teeth themselves couldn’t be returned to their proper homes. Those two holes had driven him mad for months until his gums flattened out, revealing the shape of his jawbone that had always hidden beneath.

Nizar shuffles his careful way out of the bathroom and leans against the wall next to his brother and Severus. “Am I the only one woolgathering at random?”
“No. We’re all bloody stoned, and it’s Poppy’s doing,” Severus replies, sounding like he’s grinding his teeth. “I might have threatened her with being forced to relive one of Riddle’s unending vainglorious speeches if she didn’t knock off with it.”

Nizar blinks a few times and lifts his head to peer over at Severus. “You speak of my speech patterns shifting, but I didn’t realize you could combine neutralized Oxford and West Midlands in such a way.”

“Fuck you, too.”

“Ah, the flirting,” Salazar murmurs. “Back to bed, all of us. Mayhap Thursday will be less dreary.”

*Mayhap by tomorrow I’ll remember to ask who’s teaching my classes,* Nizar thinks, and then decides he’d much rather shove his face into a pillow. It should have been the Weasley twins, anyway. Everyone was probably terrified out of their minds.
Severus feels better on Thursday morning, but “better” is a relative term. He still wants to murder someone.

Nizar wakes up to the awareness that something in the hospital wing has just changed. Given how many potions Poppy made him ingest, he’s amazed he is aware of anything at all. The soft light from the windows tells him it’s not quite dawn on Thursday morning.

Then he hears the scuff of trainer against stone. “Invisibility Charm, I presume?” he asks, not yet knowing who the visitor is. Hogwarts isn’t alarmed, so they aren’t in the hospital wing to hurt anyone.

Hermione appears a moment later when she drops the charm. Her expression is pinched and exhausted, and her lip looks to have recently bled from being worried at too often. “I’m sorry I woke you. I just—I needed to know if you were okay,” she whispers.

Nizar tries to think of something reassuring, but all that he manages is, “I’m absolutely not dead.”

Fortunately, Hermione seems to understand. She quietly makes her way to his bed and, after a moment of fretful dithering, sits down near his feet. “No one will really tell us anything except for what was in the Prophet, about You-Know-Who and the Taboo Curse, and the minor bit about recovering war mages,” she continues in that same low whisper. “Fred and George and I discussed it, and the twins were worried they’d botch an infiltration of the hospital wing. It’s one of the few things they don’t really do—sneaking into Madam Pomfrey’s territory, I mean.”

Nizar reaches out and clasps the hand she offers, though his grip is rather pathetic. “The Prophet was not lying, but it won’t be a swift recovery.”

“That’s…that’s good.” Hermione glances over at Severus, who is resolutely sleeping with his pillow crammed over his face to block out the increasing light. Then she looks over at Salazar, who is—now that Nizar is awake enough to notice—snoring. It’s not as loud as his wont, making Nizar wonder if Poppy cast a Muffling Charm to reduce the noise. “I didn’t realize he snored.”

“This is quieter than usual,” Nizar says, which is likely not a reassuring thing to hear.

“Your hair is solid brown, you know. The same shade as Salazar’s,” Hermione tells him.

Nizar blinks a few times. He hadn’t even noticed that last night when he’d had a mirror before him.
He’d been far more concerned about his aching head. “Tonks lost all of her Metamorphmagus changes when this happened,” he whispers in sudden recognition. “My eyes aren’t green, are they?”

Hermione shakes her head. “No, they’re the same sort of grey hazel they always are. Why would Tonks lose her Metamorph changes if you kept them? I mean, there is that stupid hex, but—”

Nizar holds up his hand; he can’t handle that much academic madness right now. “The only thing I lost was something I gained naturally—the sun-bleaching. I would suppose it’s because Tonks changes her appearance like it’s made of water, but she’s certain of what’s beneath all of that.” It’s as valid a theory as any.

“Brown didn’t become black, and hazel didn’t become green, because for you, that’s who you are. Certainty.” Hermione looks intrigued by that. “That’s part of how to maintain a Metamorphic change, isn’t it?”

“That certainty is necessary for all magic.” Nizar reminds her, trying not to sigh. “Lessons. Of course.”

“How are classes being handled with so many of us unavailable?”

Hermione huffs in irritation. “There are no classes right now. Between you lot being hurt and the war going on, there aren’t really any available substitutes, not when it’s Potions, Charms, Defence, and History. One or two could have been done, but not all four. Dumbledore declared that everyone would have the rest of this week off, and suggested we should use it to get started on our homework for Easter break.”

“That’s probably for the best.” Nizar thinks about it, blinking a few times as the light slowly gets brighter. “George and Fred know what I meant to cover in the Practicals for all years. Ask if they’ll host those classes over the next few days in my classroom. I doubt they’ll get anyone but volunteers, but…probably better that than no lesson at all.”

Hermione smiles. “You are such a teacher, Nizar. You’re barely conscious, and you’re ordering your Weasley assistants to pass on lessons!”

Nizar lets out a faint laugh. “At least the lectures were done for the week. You can help them, if you want, for fifth-years and younger. You’ll have something to worry about aside from myself.”

“I’ll still be worried,” Hermione counters tartly, still smiling. “But I should get used to that sort of thing anyway for next year. Oh, you should know. I’m not certain why the Underground knew to send word to me to pass on the word to you, and why they didn’t just contact Salazar directly—”

“Hermione.”

Hermione sucks in a breath. “Yes, sorry. Percy. I didn’t know he was an Earth-Speaker.”

Nizar nods. “He is still learning. He must have attempted to contact Salazar and failed; the message would have gone to the next member of the Underground available in the castle. Is he well?”

“He is, he was just…he felt it. Whatever was done on Tuesday night.” Hermione presses her lips together. “I think it frightened him.”

“It should have.” Nizar tries not to rub at his forehead again when the ache spikes. He needs more rest than this, and he’ll need to mention Percy’s reaction to Salazar when they’re all conscious again. “Send a message back the same way you received it, or write to Percy directly. Tell him that as long as he isn’t feeling ill effects, he’s fine.”

“Me?” Hermione asks in disbelief.
“Why not? You’re Underground, or you wouldn’t have gotten that message.”

“Right.” Hermione still looks baffled. “I’ll do that, I guess. And I’ll see what the Twin Terrors have to say about classes.”

“Good. Now off with you,” Nizar instructs, squeezing her hand so she’ll understand that it’s not a slight. “I want to sleep for as long as this morning allows.”

“Of course.” Hermione stands up, hesitates, and then drops a brief kiss onto his forehead. “Because you’re my friend,” she says into his ear. “I’ll let the smart ones know that you lot are truly on the mend.”

“Excellent planning. If I cared about points, I’d give you all of them,” Nizar slurs, already dropping right back into sleep.

*          *          *          *

Severus feels better on Thursday morning, but “better” is a relative term. He still wants to murder someone.

Viewing the morning papers doesn’t do a damned thing to make him less temperamental.

Those among them capable of getting out of bed—everyone but Filius—have gathered around a table that Poppy was kind enough to Conjure for them. Severus could cast magic and have it hold, now, if he needed it to, but he would regret doing so in short order. Nymphadora and Bill feel similarly, and they’re the ones in the best condition out of all nine war mages.

Sirius Black is also present, not as a member of the Order, but as Magical Duke over London. Kingsley Shacklebolt is with them to represent the M.L.E. as well as Madam Bones. Severus would rather not deal with Dumbledore in any fashion right now, especially when he has to clench his teeth through needless sympathetic gestures and words, but excluding the founder of the Order of the Phoenix would be impossible at this juncture. Poppy remains with them in case anyone’s health falters during the meeting, but it was Nizar who asked the castle itself to bring up a Privacy Charm that no magician on earth can penetrate.

“How do you know?” Remus had asked testily. His eyes have not yet ceased to be werewolf gold, and Severus is trying very hard to ignore that fact.

“If Myrddin couldn’t fucking do it, then neither can anyone else,” Nizar retorted, which only resulted in Dumbledore looking far too intrigued. Severus briefly fantasizes about snapping the fucking Elder Wand in half.

Minerva was asked to fetch the non-magical co-head of Hadrian’s Wall, but needed Nymphadora to accompany her in order to know where to go. Nymphadora cheerfully reported that she vomited after every single Apparition, all the way to London and back, but at least she didn’t pass out.

Albus Dumbledore is most displeased to have a non-magical woman inside Hogwarts. Severus thinks that Salazar is feeding off the spiteful joy of witnessing Dumbledore’s badly hidden ire in order to remain upright.

“This is the paper for Wednesday morning, on your side. The non-magical print was quiet.” Madam
Tyler lays out two copies of yesterday’s *Daily Prophet* for everyone to view. In bold print that takes up the entire top half of the newspaper, the *Prophet* announces that the Taboo Curse is back in regards to You-Know-Who. There is no further information regarding the curse, only a notation that further history and information can be found on page four—and that it should be read by everyone.

The latter half of the *Prophet* announces that Voldemort drained his own Death Eater followers of magic in order to attack the war mages as well as reactivate the Curse. The paper does not state the nature of the attack, or the names of the drained Death Eaters, but simply says that the war mages are all recovering under medical supervision. The writer was trying their best not to incite panic, but the Taboo Curse alone is going to do that. The fact that Voldemort successfully hurt the war mages will just make it worse.

“I had to rush to get that to the *Prophet*’s offices in time to be printed up for Wednesday morning,” Kingsley says. “The only reason I convinced them to print it at all is because I’m now Head of the M.L.E., and still I nearly had to summon Madam Bones.”

“No one wants to believe it, I bet,” Bill mutters. “Not after the *Prophet* spent so long insisting that You-Know-Who coming back was sodding nonsense.”

Madam Tyler looks grim. “I was InfoSec almost from the start of my career. If you want to cripple your enemy, you blind them, and your previous Minister Fudge did most of You-Know-Bloody-Who’s work for him. Blinding the war mages of the kingdom was the final stroke of his plan, not the first.” Then she passes out Thursday morning’s copies of the *Daily Prophet*.

“Fuck,” is Nizar’s quiet response. Severus thinks that an apt summary, biting back on a further slew of foul language.

The *Prophet* headline is screaming about an attack in Diagon Alley. The accompanying photos are of rubble littered along the Alley’s main thoroughfare. Unfortunately for every student in the school, the legs of an obviously deceased man are protruding from stone debris in the lower left corner. Aurors who are barely visible blurs are working in the photo’s background, though Severus recognizes Proudfoot by his stature.

Hestia Jones and Sturgis Podmore, part of a delegation of the Order who responded to the M.L.E.’s raised alert regarding the attack, both died defending the Alley. Severus wasn’t particularly fond of Hestia, but she never treated ill with him. She’d been with the Order since it reconvened last summer, and that will be a hard blow for some of the others to take. Severus feels a brief moment of pity for Podmore, who’d only just begun to recover from his unjust imprisonment in Azkaban.

Tom Potage, of Potage’s Cauldrons, died in the fighting. Severus strongly suspects his are the legs in the photograph. His parents, brother, and sister give brief statements about keeping the store open and not caving in to threats from cowards who wear masks. It makes Severus think more highly of them, even if he did have to once threaten the Potages with rather abhorrent fates in order to convince them to make proper pewter cauldrons.

Dickory Thistle, a close cousin of Marjory Thistle and the proprietor of Gambol and Japes Joke Shop, was also killed by Death Eaters. Marjory herself is praised by the *Prophet* for her heroics in defending her employers, the owners of Materia Medica Magicae. Thanks to Marjory, Simone Scamander suffered only minor injuries; fighting is not that Scamander’s specialty. Scamander’s wife, Lillian Ollivander, is in St. Mungo’s, but expected to fully recover in a day or two.

“Oh, that extortionist of a cobbler died,” Nizar comments after Fleur voices pity for the dead man in the photograph.
“That extortionist of a cobbler was a member of the Underground. Gods dammit.” Salazar gets up from the table and leans against the closest wall, swearing under his breath.

“Pure-blooded custom,” Nizar says in apparent realization. “Oh, that would have been perfect.”

“Who was he?” Dumbledore asks, sounding far too stern. That nearly blows through Severus’s last nerve, but he holds back. He always did before. He can do so now.

Salazar turns back to face them, rubbing at his beard. “Gregory Max.”

“Shit!” Kingsley hisses, and then glances at Fleur and Minerva in apology. “Gregory was Alice Max Longbottom’s cousin, the black sheep of the family, and apparently, a not-so-deceased Death Eater.”

“Well, he is most certainly deceased now.” Salazar rakes his hair back with both hands. “Gods, that’s infuriating, and not only because I considered him to be one of the most likely of us to survive this war. You’d be amazed at how many idiots pour forth their secrets in front of a mere shoemaker.”

“Polyjuice, or an illusion?” Black asks.

“Polyjuice,” Salazar answers. “He’d have died with the guise in place, and that potion needs a living body in order to return one’s appearance to rights. Gregory will go into a tomb wearing the wrong man’s face, and the only thing you have is my word that the dead man in question was not Horace Stapleton.”

Kingsley nods. “I’ll make certain the Max family is made aware of the truth, so they can grant their cousin a proper funeral. They didn’t do so before—both due to the politics of the situation, and the lack of a body.”

“But Horace Stapleton did exist,” Dumbledore rumbles. “What happened to him?” Severus wonders if Dumbledore is angry about the deception, or more upset that he won’t have the deceased cobbler about to create Dumbledore’s eyesore eccentricities regarding wizarding footwear.

“Oh, he died years ago, but I had nothing to do with it.” Salazar lets out a brief, humorless laugh. “Stapleton was overseas visiting his only living relatives in New Zealand when he suffered a fatal heart attack. A member of the Underground was also in the area and heard about the man’s untimely death. The timing was too good to pass up; they rather stealthily stole all of Stapleton’s hair before his burial. Given how grand Wizarding Britain is at communicating with the world at large, it was no trouble at all for Gregory to step in and take Stapleton’s place in Diagon Alley.”

“I know these losses are hard on Wizarding Britain,” Madam Tyler says, “but that isn’t the worst of it.” Then she passes out copies of The Independent and The Times.

Staithes in North Yorkshire. Lacock in Wiltshire. Abbotsbury in Dorset. Painswick in Gloucestershire. Hawkshead in Cumbria. All of them are reported as having been subjected to a coordinated terrorist attack Wednesday night from an as yet unidentified fringe group. Several politicians, including John Major, express their sympathy and anger regarding the attack on each village, and promise full investigations and resolutions, as well as restitution to those who lost family during the night. There is speculation in the articles regarding Wednesday’s attacks and those that occurred on fifteenth March, wondering if they’re linked to the same group, but no one is willing to confirm the theory.

They won’t need to bother to confirm anything, Severus thinks with intense bitterness. It will be obvious soon enough, and this time there is no activity among extremist groups out of Ireland to pin the blame upon.
“Twenty-two dead,” Fleur murmurs. “Mon Dieu, c’est terrible.”

“He went after the smaller villages, not the cities,” Minerva whispers. “Just as he did during the first war.”

“The bodies are all accounted for, at least, so there is no reason to fear that he has resumed the habit of creating…well…zombies,” Madam Tyler says.

“Inferi,” Kingsley corrects.

Madam Tyler raises an eyebrow. “From the description I was given of their attributes, there really isn’t much of a difference.”

“Thirteen homes burnt to the ground.” Bill shakes his head after reading the article. “This was about stirring fear. Dad said they pulled that one a lot during the first war.”

“It was also a test.” Nizar is studying the photographs on The Times with an expression of restrained anger. “Riddle wanted to know if the war mages would be aware of it. Now that he knows we were not…”

“How long is this going to last?” Madam Tyler asks bluntly. “I’ve already had to inform Her Majesty as to the injury done to you all, but I could not answer her question as to whether or not it is a permanent difficulty.”

Nizar glances around the room. “If you have not received an identification card from MI-5’s Magical Liaison Office, get out. I have such a migraine, and don’t have the manners at the moment to make it a nicely worded request. Just go.”

Kingsley takes it better than the others, smiling briefly before he stands and leaves the hospital room they’re cloistered in. Poppy scowls the entire way out, but Severus isn’t surprised by that. It isn’t about being excluded, but concern for her patients that stirs her temper. Minerva drops a brief kiss onto Salazar’s temple, which is accompanied by a glare that insists he’ll be telling her the results of this meeting later.

Dumbledore is the one who decides to be utterly fucking annoying. “My boy, are you certain about this?” he asks. “Excluding the M.L.E. and the Order might stir others to concern, or even panic.”

“They’re already panicked,” Nizar snaps. “You’ll receive an answer to the question Madam Tyler has so wisely asked, but you will not be privy to the conversation about to be held.”

“Nizar—”

Nizar’s resulting glare could possibly melt stone. It also has the interesting effect of causing Dumbledore to vanish.

“Where did you put him?” Salazar asks, smiling.

“He is having an impromptu and long overdue meeting with Aberforth. I’m certain they’ll have a wondrous time,” Nizar growls. Then he places one hand over his face and breathes until he no longer looks murderous.

“Now that this school’s charming Head Teacher has been removed, I’ll ask my next question.” Madam Tyler doesn’t look the slightest bit disturbed by the means of Dumbledore’s sudden removal, which makes Severus better of her than he already did. “Does Tom Riddle’s attack on the war mages mean that he has officially declared war against the United Kingdom?”
“Yes. Not that such does us a bit of good at the moment,” Salazar answers for his brother. “That lack of awareness is exactly what Twit Riddle was counting upon.”

“Then the Twit has a plan that he’ll want to carry out soon.” Black sighs and glances up at the ceiling. “I agree with Nizar; I hate it when that fucking bastard is intelligent.”

Nizar nods at Sirius in agreement before calling for a house-elf. “Gellis.”

The old house-elf appears a moment later, though he is far more stately and well-groomed than the first time Severus met him. “Yes, Protector?”

“On the second-highest storey of the Dark Tower, there is a set of living quarters that has no door, only a wall that will allow entry to very few. Do you know which rooms I mean?” Nizar asks. Salazar straightens in place, suddenly far more interested in the proceedings.

Gellis bows his head. “Gellis knows of it. The elves cleaned those rooms of dust when we chose to clean all the living places within the Dark Tower before the foolish child’s banishment.”

Nizar looks grateful for the courtesy. “In the sitting room of those quarters is a single painting, hung on the wall opposite the windows. Please bring it here. You may need to ask another for assistance.”

Gellis bows and Disapparates. When he returns, he is in Cindrilicus’s company. It’s taking both elves quite a bit of effort to lug around the painting. Cindrilicus hoists up the thick, dark-wood frame, and Gellis prods at it until the painting sticks to the wall. “That is being a heavy painting, Protector.”

“It isn’t the painting, it’s the magic. It was never meant to be moved.” Nizar stares at the sun-bright room on canvas that otherwise lacks an occupant. “Thank you for retrieving it. Four elves will be necessary to return this portrait to its proper home.”

Cindrilicus looks like he’d rather do anything else. Gellis merely nods. “As the Protector wishes.”

The elves depart, leaving curious silence in their wake.

“An empty canvas?” Madam Tyler asks. “I’ve seen the magical portrait in the Prime Minister’s office that is meant to be a messenger for Ministry announcements, but at least that particular painting has an occupant.”

Nizar’s expression is close to a smile, but still so far removed it doesn’t qualify at all. “It isn’t empty, Amelia. He’s merely making certain that it’s safe to be seen.”

“Paranoia as an art form,” Salazar murmurs. “It still bothers me so that someone who’d mastered that particular state of being was so easily felled.”

“Who says it was easy? It had to have been an utter sarding clusterfuck!”

The dark-haired, brown-eyed man who peers around the edge of the canvas frame is pale and slender. He has a pointed black beard that only emphasizes the elfin features of childhood, but there is nothing of childhood left in his gaze. The portrait’s black robes and dark green shirt are strikingly similar in cut and style to what Nizar had worn in his portrait, making Severus wonder if those clothes were a far more deliberate decision than he’d previously assumed.

Elfric leans against the portrait’s frame as if it were a wall in the canvas. “Father, I know you didn’t forget that this painting was never meant to be moved.”

Nizar manages a true smile. “My apologies, Elfric. None of us are really capable of making the journey to the upper reaches of the Dark Tower right now.”
Black draws in a gasping breath before he slaps his hand over his mouth. “I didn’t realize there was
another painting of you in the castle,” Lupin says, glancing at Nizar in frowning accusation.

“That is because this painting has specific purposes that were not related to being a mere portrait,”
Elfric answers, eying Lupin sternly. “And yes, I do see what you mean. Most of you look like death,
and I’m certainly an authority on what such an appearance entails.”

“At least you bothered to learn English,” Severus says. “Did you gain or lose stubbornness as an
adult?”

“A bit of both, really, just in regards to different aspects of life.” Elfric glances at each of them in
turn, though his eyes linger longest on Salazar and Nizar. “Eight war mages, a properly retitled Duke
over London, and a non-magical lady who has definitely served with both armies and spies. Oh, this
ought to be such fun. What happened, Father?”

“A problem, one I don’t know the nature of in order to even begin solving it. However, I know for a
fact that your teaching master in Necromancy was a dirty, cheating bastard.”

Elfric grins, but doesn’t deny it. “What’s the difficulty?”

Nizar’s explanation is elegant, for all it is also blunt. “He who named himself Flight from Death
somehow gained the knowledge needed to part a war mage from their connection to the kingdom.”

Elfric straightens up and fully faces them in the canvas. “Are you shitting me?” Seeing the whole of
the portrait drives home a truth that Nizar has been certain of all along: Elfric deSlizarse looks
nothing like Utredus the Gaunt. He barely resembles the corpse that was taken from the Gaunt’s
tomb and reburied in Hogwarts’ cemetery. Aside from the lack of gauntness, there is too much
humor and kindness lurking in Elfric’s expression, even while in the midst of a temper.

Nizar sighs. “No, I pulled you off the wall of your own quarters for no other reason than to fuck with
you.”

“Well, it’s you. I wouldn’t find such all that surprising.” Elfric reaches up and strokes his bearded
chin, revealing that he wears one of the silver Deslizarse-crested rings on his left index finger. “Was
it everything, magical titles included? Or was it merely the sense of the kingdom as a whole?”

“I still hold Brae. Which you know all about, as doubtless you have spies all over this castle,” Nizar
says dryly. Elfric shrugs in response. His expression is so guileless, so entirely Slytherin, that Severus
has to bite back a smile.

“I can still smell my grandmother’s flowers in Powys if I concentrate on it,” Lupin says. “Gives me a
fucking headache, but it’s there, so I assume the magical title held.”

Adele nods. “I can do the same for the Greenwood, so I’m certain it’s still mine.”

“The bloody Highlands smell just the same as the land around this castle, but…” Salazar glances off
to the north. “Still. It’s there. I feel as if I’m peering through muck to see that connection, but I have it.
The family connection for Gipuzkoa survives, as well.”

Nizar looks surprised. “Does it?”

“Bloody hell.” Salazar sighs in resignation. “We’ll have to repair that connection later, then.”

“The rest of us aren’t titled,” Bill says, “and I think I’m glad for it, personally. The ones who held
noble title are the ones who were worse off after Tom Riddle pulled his nonsense on Tuesday
evening.”

“Tuesday—it’s fucking Thursday now!” Elfric stares at them and then scrubs his face with both hands. The mannerism strongly reminds Severus of Nizar. It’s…charming. Sad, also, given the centuries that have passed since Elfric’s actual death, but he can appreciate the shared behavior between father and son.

“Our half-goblin war mage isn’t even capable of being in the room. He still sleeps. This magic, this sundering, it struck him very hard.” Fleur’s accent is the hard neutral she doesn’t bother with unless she’s discomfited.

“If he was not a Half-blood, he’d be dead.” Elfric glances at Salazar. “If my uncle were not utterly mental and currently immortal, I imagine this would have killed him, too. Your saving grace might have been your titled connection to the Highlands, but I’m honestly not certain if it would have been enough.”

Black sits up, eyes narrowed. “Then you do know something.”

Elfric inclines his head. “Yes, Grandfather, I do.” Black appears entertainingly gobsmacked to be addressed that way; Severus reserves the right to laugh at that expression later. It isn’t as if the other three portraits of Nizar’s children haven’t been calling Black that for months now.

“Father.” Elfric returns his attention to Nizar. “Has any sense of the kingdom returned to you at all? I know exactly how you stored it, so you would be the first to know if anything had come back.”

“Oh, this is not going to be pleasant.” Nizar closes his eyes, brow furrowing as if searching for something. Then he jerks his head up, wide-eyed. “Back in a moment!” he shouts, and then makes a mad dash for the nearest toilet. The door doesn’t shut in time to cover up the sound of someone in the midst of trying to sick up their entire digestive system.

“I’m not certain if that was a yes or a no,” Madam Tyler observes in a wry voice.

“It definitely wasn’t a negative,” Elfric says. “But I don’t yet know what sort of a yes it was, either.”

Nizar returns to the table a few minutes later with a wet towel plastered over most of his face. “That did nothing to help the migraine,” he mumbles, slumping back down in his seat. “There is something that has returned. It’s hard to find amidst a great deal of nothing, but it’s there.”

“Then it is a block for certain.” Elfric crosses his arms, which reveals two more rings on his right hand. One is silver, set with a sapphire; the other is gold, set with ruby. Severus would have to be a daft fucking idiot not to recognize that Elfric wore the gold ring for Brice. Silver and sapphire would be meant for Galiena, but Severus imagines the tradition began with his brother’s death.

“It could have been a true severance, given what the event did to all of you, but a severance wouldn’t bring forth any sort of recall afterwards. Rededication would have been a requirement. Granted, a severance would have been more easily solved by rededicating yourselves to the kingdom, as those connections would re-forge themselves at once. A rededication in regards to this block won’t help in the slightest.”

“What sort of block, how long does it last, and can I fucking kill whoever did such a thing to make it end sooner?” Salazar asks.

“It would be so much simpler if you could end it with the caster’s death.” Elfric shakes his head. “Uncle, you know earth magic. For something this strong, that is not magic tied to the caster. It was done to the earth, and now the earth holds that memory, not the magician.”
“Then you do think it’s an elemental block,” Salazar says.

“Only by the nature of needing to use the earth as a conduit,” Elfric replies. “This sort of block would have attacked magical ties, not the earth itself. You could still seek out and kill the magician who did this, if only to keep them from repeating the event, but they likely saved you the trouble and offed themselves merely by doing as Tom Riddle asked of them.”

Severus frowns. “You don’t think it was Riddle himself who created this block? We know he drew on the magic of eighteen Marked Death Eaters—students within the castle—to have the power to do so.”

“More like seventeen-and-a-half.” Nizar presses the towel against his forehead. “When I tampered with Cassius’s Mark so Riddle couldn’t kill him, it gave him a bit of protection. Not enough, but he’s doing better than the others.”

“The others are all still unconscious,” Severus responds. “Seventeen and one-fourth.”

“Semantics aside, Riddle drew power, yes, but that doesn’t mean he had to use that power himself,” Elfric says. “Magic is transferable, and that arrogant little dust mote was always a bright sort for figuring out crude ways of doing what he wished. However, I’d say he used the majority of what was stolen to reinstate that lovely Taboo Curse. Now, as to your probably dead magician—”

“I’m sorry for interrupting,” Madam Tyler says. “Why do you think they would be dead?”

“Because the earth would resent what was done to her, what she was used for,” Salazar answers, and the portrait nods his agreement. “The United Kingdom is not quite two centuries old, but the Kingdom of England has been established on this island for a very long time now, and it was the Queen of England who dedicated the war mages to this land. The magic of the earth understands how Crown and war mage are meant to integrate, to work together. This sort of block would be a violation of that magic, and the earth would rebel. If the magician fool enough to do this was fortunate, they are now the equivalent of a Squib. If they were not fortunate, they are a pile of ash. Pity, that; I’d still prefer to kill them myself.”

“It wouldn’t have been an elemental magician who would have done this, or an Earth-Speaker like Uncle. They would have refused, knowing the attempt would likely mean their death. This was possibly a fool who found the right sort of spell—which I doubt,” Elfric adds thoughtfully. “I’d say it was someone like Father, one who can see or feel magic around them, even if it’s not an elemental inclination. None of you are acting as if this spell had finesse. It looks more as if you were all pummeled with boulders.”

“Nizar?” Fleur prompts when Nizar doesn’t speak.

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“Nizar?” Fleur prompts when Nizar doesn’t speak.

“I think Elfric is correct,” Nizar says after mulling over his words. “Hogwarts may sit upon this isle’s strongest magical node, but there are others. If a fool magician with my sensitivity to magic found a node and tried to push their intent through it, that would have given them the strength to establish this block—even if Riddle gave them part of the magic he’d stolen from the others to help things along. What still remains of concern is not knowing how long it will last.”

“No, you’ve two concerns left to you, and I’m ashamed to be related to you both for not yet figuring it out,” Elfric counters with a biting smile. “To the first—the earth rebels, just as Uncle said. It will take time, but that connection between war mage and kingdom will heal. The fact that it is already beginning to return is a sign that it will probably take weeks, not a horror of months.” He pauses. “I would strongly suggest that each of you who are tied to a magical title visit that land’s strongest point and dwell there for at least the passing of a day. It will help soothe the pain this has caused. For those
who do not have such ties, spend a day in a place you feel the strongest association for, the closest
ties. It doesn’t need to be a home, but it’s always convenient to have a roof over your head.”

“Definitely home for me, then.” Nymphadora glances up at the painting. “What is it that Nizar and
Salazar are missing? It has to do with Twit Riddle, doesn’t it?”

The portrait looks pleased. “It does indeed.”

“Elfric, my head aches so much right now that reading words on a page was a proven difficulty,”
Nizar says tiredly. “Please pass along a hint.”

“A hint.” Elfric smiles, razor-sharp and full of hatred. Severus doesn’t understand why until Elfric
continues speaking. “That bastard Drugo split his soul seventy-five times without losing his strength,
and it was not merely because he had seventy-five magically bound puppets to draw upon. That was
helpful, yes, and it caused my brother’s death, but Drugo would have been formidable even without
those soul shard links. Why was Twit Riddle driven to discorporation after forming a sixth
Horcrux?”

“Because he’s bad at making fucking Horcruxes?” Black offers, not entirely in jest.

Elfric tilts his head. “Given that he crafted his first at age fifteen, you could perhaps label that one a
poor attempt, but I wouldn’t call it a certainty. Though afterwards—afterwards, Grandfather, he
knew exactly what he was doing. Riddle made deliberate choices regarding those shards of soul.
Why would six turn him into a bodiless remnant?”

Bill glances at Nizar and Salazar before speaking. “Dumbledore says a lot about Lily Potter’s blood
protecting Harry, which is why the attempt to kill him rebounded and turned Riddle into a wandering
bit of discorporated arsehole.”

Nizar looks like he wants to bang his head on the table. “Dumbledore is still spouting that nonsense?
Seriously?”

Nymphadora frowns. “He claimed he wanted to hide the full truth and horror of the Horcruxes from
the rest of the Order. I didn’t agree with that, but those of us who were there to learn the lesson when
the Horcrux Locket was destroyed couldn’t come up with a good counter-argument for why the
others should know.”


“That it’s a lot of fanciful bullshit.” Elfric says in disgust. “The intentional sacrifice of life and blood
to safeguard another protected Lily Potter’s son against interference from the soul shard he carried,
and was meant to protect him from all other magical or metaphysical dangers until his magical
maturity. Someone’s foolish meddling saw to it that the latter bit never came to pass, not in the
manner that it should have.

“Bill Weasley, the spell cast on Hallowe’en of 1981 rebounded because Tom Riddle had never
before bothered to learn how to make living Horcruxes. It’s far easier to create a Horcrux from an
object; a living being requires…additional steps, ones Riddle did not perform. Other than that
blunder, Riddle still intended the strength he put into the attempt of turning an infant into a soul jar.”

“Oh.” Bill scowls. “That makes so much more sense than the other shite. Why not just tell us?”

Salazar gives Bill a level look. “Not wanting others to feel fear would be venturing a kind guess, but
control is more likely to be the true answer.”
“Control the information, control the people.” Bill sighs and glances at Fleur. “Well, I’m running out of illusions to shatter. What about you?”

Fleur smiles in return. “I am one-quarter Veela, and my father’s brother murdered my parents. J’avais peu d’illusions que d’autres pourraient détruire.”

Elfric taps his fingers along his upper arms in a show of impatience. “Oh, please. I know you’re all dragging along at the moment, but Riddle’s intent is so obvious that you’re driving me to distraction at how you can overlook it!”

“Copies.” Severus glances over to find Nizar rubbing the right side of his forehead, grimacing as if pained. “He was never making a typical Horcrux at all. Tom Riddle, who fears death so much that he murdered family and split his soul at age fifteen, has been making literal fucking copies of himself!”

“Please explain that to me,” Madam Tyler orders, though she looks shocked. “It sounds pants-wetting terrifying, but I would like to understand exactly what you mean.”

“We learned in February that a goblin’s magic stopped recognizing Tom Riddle on thirty-first October in 1981, the moment he became, as Bill said, a discorporated wandering arsehole.” Salazar looks deeply disturbed. “Such has bothered me since we learned of it. I’d thought, as my brother also did, that Riddle simply had a poor understanding of the concept of a soul jar. I thought the discorporation to be another demonstration of the ignorance that led him to sunder himself so badly.”

Madam Tyler is following the conversation like a bloodhound on a scent. “Sunder himself badly?”

“For every copy Riddle made, he gave it an equal portion of his magic,” Nizar explains. “In doing so, he was giving up strength. He didn’t drain the Marked students of their magic for the power to cast spells or spread fear—though it will certainly do that. He did it because he doesn’t have enough strength of his own any longer to do things such as re-casting the Taboo Curse on his favored name. His magic, and his soul, were in seven equal fragments. Four of those have been destroyed; only three of those parts remain.”

“And he’s still that sodding powerful?” Bill asks in disbelief.

Severus thinks on the exhaustion that always plagued him before the Dark Mark was removed. Despite living a pampered life in which white hair should have avoided her person for at least another decade, Narcissa has strands of white hair that she’s hidden beneath a powerful beauty charm since Draco’s birth. Lucius’s hair is solid white, though he took great pains to keep that aging from otherwise showing on his face. If the Prince line were given to white hair, Severus would probably be claiming ownership of a great deal.

Every Death Eater Severus knows of who bears the Dark Mark looks at least a full decade older than they should. There are exceptions, both younger and older, but it was not merely war, or life in Voldemort’s court, that caused their aging. “He’s always been using the Dark Mark to drain others for power. Initiation to the ranks and control over the Death Eaters were secondary intentions. Riddle needed power to replace what he’d willingly given away, so he convinced others to give it to him. And none of us ever realized he’d done so.”

“Now you’re all bloody thinking like intelligent magicians again,” Elfric says with grim pleasure.

“So, we just kill all the fucking Death Eaters, and Riddle becomes easier to deal with than a frozen rat.” Lupin’s eyes are now glimmering like the wolf’s eyes under a full moon. For once, Severus is too fucking exhausted to be alarmed.
“That’s not an option,” Nizar reminds them. “Even if it’s a tempting one.”

“Wartime conditions apply, but not mass murder,” Black adds, though he looks just as ferally tempted as Lupin.

“While I’m glad you lot have finally caught on, we were discussing Riddle’s ideas on immortality, not his means of magical theft,” Elfric says. “You can be incensed about the theft on your own time.”

“Magical theft.” Nizar lets out an amused snort. “No wonder I read that book three times. I just didn’t understand the impetus aside from the enjoyment of it.”

“Wizards stealing magic.” Severus feels like rolling his eyes. “You weren’t the only one who should have given that concept more thought.”

“I should already have thought on the idea of copies. That fucking soul jar.” Salazar shakes his head. “Even after it spoke to me, I thought it nothing more than a particularly powerful Horcrux.”

“You mean the one removed from—” Elfric hesitates, expression twisting in bemusement. “—from the child. Yes?”

Salazar is doing his best to hide it, but the distress leaks through. “Yes. While attempting the soul jar’s removal, the Horcrux realized what was happening and attempted to become itself. Fortunately, it gave itself away in the process. Riddle has never been very good at demonstrating his humanity.”

“The diary Horcrux did the very same thing,” Nizar says. “Once it learned that Lord Twit was considered dead, it attempted to drain Bill’s sister of all life and magic. Tom Riddle didn’t want to die, so the shard was desperate to become itself. The castle’s memory of that confrontation shows that the shard came very, very close to succeeding.”

Bill swallows and glances away. “I don’t think I wanted to know that. I’m glad Harry was there for her, even if it was a mental thing for a kid to be doing.”

“How did you realize it, Elfric?” Lupin asks the painting.

Elfric inclines his head in wary acknowledgement of the question. “All magicians of my time were given basic lessons in how to identify a soul jar, and how to destroy one, but I’m a Necromancer, Remus Lupin. We were not taught the basics, but the whole of such things. It is the stuff of nightmares, and I suffered my share. An inanimate Horcrux of normal making will not bleed black blood when it is destroyed. It takes a great deal of strength within the object to cause that effect, and yet, every Horcrux of Riddle’s that has been destroyed has bled. Not only has it bled, that blood was corrosive, caustic. That is a sign of immense power, as well as immense evil. Good and evil might be considered abstract concepts, but magic can make them very, very real, as well as exceptionally dangerous. Each one of those inanimate vessels, as well as the two living ones, were imbued with the ability to become Tom Riddle if his original form were to perish. One way or another, that ill-named magician meant to attain immortality.”

“How could Riddle do such a thing?” Fleur asks, gripping Bill’s hand. Severus thinks it’s meant to be a comforting gesture, but the tips of Fleur’s fingers still end in claws rather than human nails and flesh.

“Inanimate Horcruxes, soul jars, do not age.” Salazar props his elbow on the table and rests his head against his hand. “The magical theft is horrible enough, but this notion of copying is ever so much worse. Every time I finally believe I’ve come to the limits of that man’s vileness, he turns a new trick to prove me wrong.”
Nizar gives Salazar a brief glance that Severus can’t interpret. “Riddle has moments of true creative brilliance, but had he known that living Horcruxes do not have long and healthy lifespans, he wouldn’t have made either attempt…but he is such an arrogant bastard. He would have wanted to prove he could do it after that first failure, but instead proved with Nagini’s creation that he has blind spots that make him exceptionally foolish. Our advantage in this is twofold: Riddle can no longer create new Horcruxes thanks to his own slipshod Necromancy with Blood-and-Bone—”

Elfric snorts. “That fucking idiot.”

“—and there are only two Horcruxes remaining. We don’t know where the first one resides, though Dumbledore might. The second Horcrux is the worst difficulty, as it likely resides in the Lestrange Vault at Gringotts. Thank Severus for that information. If it hadn’t been for the partial failure of a rushed Obliviation, we would have no idea at all where to search.”

“But…goblins. In a goblin-controlled vault.” Bill buries his face in his hands. “If the Lestranges had it properly catalogued, it won’t matter that it’s a fucking Horcrux. The goblins will never release it to anyone except a living member of the Lestrange family.”

“I’m more worried about the idea of those two Horcruxes deciding maybe they have to become themselves, too.” Nymphadora wrinkles her nose in distaste. “Then we wouldn’t have to deal with one Twit Riddle, but three.”

“I’m still far more disturbed by the idea that Twit Riddle was willing to become a giant pit viper,” Nizar responds in amusement.

“He’d have bloody well needed wandless magic to succeed in that form.” Salazar says. “Well, unless he also had the intelligence to spell the snake to Transfigure itself into something more human-like if the Horcrux awakened.”

“Then I, for one, am very glad that the viper Horcrux is a Petrified scatter of broken stone somewhere in the M.L.E.’s evidence collection,” Severus retorts. “Some questions I have no wish to see answered.”

Madam Tyler looks disturbed. “As if my life were not challenging enough. Riddle’s priorities are nightmarish. Thank you so very much, Lord Nizar, for getting me entangled in this disaster.”

Nizar only smiles at her sarcasm. “You’re welcome. You’ll need to coordinate with Kingsley. We need to know how far the M.L.E. can spread themselves across this isle, and if they have the means to request assistance from other countries in Europe. Until this severance is healed, we have no way of knowing where Riddle will strike next—and we have to know. I refuse to leave this kingdom helpless because he had a fit of irritating brilliance.”

“Is there any other way to deal with the Horcrux issue so we can end this threat?” Fleur asks.

“Theoretically, if I’m close enough, I can use my sense of blood magic to sever his ties to those Horcruxes,” Nizar says, but then he grimaces. “But if they’re copies…I would be fighting a very strong connection. I’d have to make the attempt to know if it was even possible.”

“And none of us are fond of the idea of you and Riddle sharing that sort of close space. Again,” Severus adds, glaring at Nizar. He wants no repeat of the incident that occurred in the Department of Mysteries in December.

“No, it’s not a pleasant thought,” Nizar agrees, but he is staring at Elfric’s portrait. “Unfortunately, that is exactly what Tom Riddle wants.”
Amelia and Kingsley take their leave, already discussing what will be needed to keep as much of Britain under magical guard—and perhaps even non-magical guard—as possible. After that point, normal concerns regain precedence.

“Who the hell has been teaching my classes?” Severus asks.

Nizar looks up from the tea he’s been staring at rather than drinking. He’s been thinking on the idea of Riddle’s copy-Horcruxes, but it’s been difficult to concentrate. “I don’t think anyone took over for us.”

“There haven’t been classes at all, you daft idiots,” Tonks tells them, rolling her eyes. “Four teachers are out of commission for four of the school’s primary subjects, plus twenty N.E.W.T.-year students are in the hospital wing. I overheard Poppy muttering that Easter Break has begun far too early for her liking.”

“They’ll survive the week without us,” Salazar mutters from the bed he’s reclaimed. He’s lying face-down and impersonating a beached sea creature. “If needs must, we can extend the school year by a week to make up for the lack. The little darlings can cope.”

Nizar looks over at Sirius, who is standing where the Vanished table had been. He’s staring at Elfric’s empty painting, a faint frown on his face. Nizar asked for the painting to be retrieved out of two-fold desperation. He was honest in saying the trip was unmanageable, but he also couldn’t stand the idea of going to that part of the Dark Tower. Even though Nizar is one of two men still alive with the ability to enter Elfric’s quarters, his son was still alive the last time he went into those rooms. He would prefer that visit to remain the last.

He didn’t expect that speaking with the adult portrait of Elfric would soothe some of the grief lingering in his heart.

“He’s not very talkative unless challenged,” Nizar warns Sirius.

“I was thinking on that, actually.” Sirius clears his throat. “You know, you should be out and about in this castle.”

Elfric peers back around the edge of his frame, scowling. “What? Why?”

“Well, no child in this school has ever heard of The Gaunt, and thank God for that,” Sirius says. Nizar shivers at the idea and tries his best to ignore it. “But the paintings remember him. I walk through this castle, and I can tell. He left fear behind on too many faces. I mean, they’re paintings, and they hide it well, but I know what sort of fear they’re dwelling on. I lived it myself for far too long. You being among them again—*you*, not him—I think would do quite a bit of good for all of this school’s ancient relics. It might even convince a few stubborn paintings to wake up.”

Salazar lifts his head and regards Sirius with a bleary expression. “You think some of them remain asleep out of fear of what the Gaunt might do to them?”

Sirius nods. “It’s as solid a theory as any. With Pomona tied into the magic, why wouldn’t they wake up?”
Elfric stalks across the room in his own painting. “I really and truly bloody hate that you have a
point, but Grandfather—this frame was hung where it was for a reason. My younger self knows
lesser magics, and I kept that distinction deliberate. I know of things that most were never, ever
meant to conceive of.”

“Then we leave your frame where it’s safe, where you meant it to be,” Sirius counters. “You can’t be
harmed if you’re wandering through other portraits, can you?”

Elfric stops pacing. “Theoretically, no. If someone is destroying a painting that I was not part of, the
magic sort of….nudges me into the closest intact canvas.”

“Trust me, I’m aware of that, or the Fat Lady—”

“Fellona,” Nizar hisses at Sirius, incensed.

Sirius winces. “Right, her. Or else Fellona’s portrait on Gryffindor Tower wouldn’t have survived
my fit of insanity. Can a portrait be subjected to the Imperius Curse?”

Elfric looks insulted. “Not this portrait.”

“Then why not do it?” Sirius asks. “What can it hurt?”

Elfric hesitates. “I worry that they will ask me things I cannot answer. Students denied answers often
try to quench their curiosity in other, far more dangerous fashion.”

“If they do, that’s not your bloody fault,” Sirius replies. “You weren’t about when Riddle was
searching this school for all of the nasty shit he could find, were you?”

“No.” Elfric sighs. “I’ll think on it,” he says, and then vanishes from the frame.

“Should I have said that?” Sirius asks, still gazing at the empty painting.

“You said nothing wrong,” Nizar replies, rubbing at his aching head and wondering how long it will
take for the stupid migraine to leave him in peace. “You’re right, and he’s right. Knowing Elfric,
he’ll figure out a compromise.”

Nizar calls for the elves, who arrive in a cluster of four. They’re careful to remove Elfric’s heavy
wooden frame from the wall before they Disapparate with it. If the portrait is moved again, it will
require the magical strength of eight elves, and then sixteen if such is done again, and continue on
thrusly until the portrait will be of such weight that the only thing capable of moving it will be a
chasm opening up in the earth.

“All right. I have to go back to London. Even if I can’t sense much of anything in Diagon Alley, I
still know what’s going on over the whole of London County,” Sirius says, though he looks as if
he’d prefer to stay. “It’ll be easier on the M.L.E. if they don’t have to guard anything outside the
Alley’s boundary. I doubt You-Know-Who is going to do anything in London, but given how we
found Peter, I’d rather not put that to the test. I’ll be taking Remus out to Powys first to leave him at
his grandmother’s old place. What about you lot?”

“Minerva is Apparating me to a spot in the Highlands a bit north of here,” Salazar says without
lifting his head. “It’ll be a nice overnight, but I may well be taking this bloody mattress with me.”

Adele raises her head from her pillow long enough to speak. “Pomona is being kind enough to take
me to the Greenwood, but I’ll be staying in a borrowed tent behind a fair amount of wards. I don’t
dare try to stay in the Manor. My mother might be there, and then…well. I’d prefer to avoid that for
“To be politic with Dumbledore after unceremoniously tossing him into Hogsmeade, I’ll ask him to take me out to the Heights of Brae,” Nizar adds, though he’d rather eat a hospital bed pan. “It’s the strongest point of the titled lands outside of Hogwarts, and I think I need that right now. I’m bloody well making Dumbledore leave me there, though. I can ward a circle, hide under a tarp, and tell everything to fuck off for a day.”

“Take an elf with you,” Severus suggests. Nizar can tell that Severus is frustrated he can’t accompany Nizar himself. They’re both currently useless for any sort of magic, or moving about in general. Besides, if Nizar is strengthened by the Heights, then Severus will be achieving the same end by remaining in the castle he’s magically tied to. “Half of them adore you, and wouldn’t mind acting as a guard.”

Nizar smiles; it’s a brilliant idea, one he was in too much pain to consider. “That’s a good idea for all of us. I’ll talk to them about it before Sirius leaves.”

The elves are so eager to agree that Nizar wonders if there is going to be a house-elf fistfight in regards to who accompanies whom. In the end, Winky and Dobby agree to share the duty of watching over him on the Heights, which means Nizar can avoid Dumbledore. Excellent.

Rubinny and a young elf named Choppy will meet Sirius and Remus in Wales. Trinitus and Cindrilicus—who are grand-niece and great-uncle, respectively—agree to guard Salazar so that Minerva doesn’t need to remain with him. Racifras and Filky decide to watch over Adele. Nizar approves of that last pairing; Filky is very much a Slytherin-aligned elf. Tonks mutters something about preferring to stay with Remus, but still decides to go to her parents’ home. Kreacher pops into the hospital wing, gives Tonks a stern glare, and declares that he will be watching over the Half-blood of the House of Black. Tonks looks too startled by Kreacher’s vehemence to argue with him.

Bill and Fleur are remaining together. They’re going not to Bill’s home, or to Fleur’s, but to Gringotts. “Neutral territory,” Bill says, and Fleur nods. Gellis frowns over that decision and insists that he will escort them to the goblins.

Fleur smiles in gratitude. “Thank you. The goblins will look after us after that. Even if we are not of their clan, we are an investment.” Nizar thinks of all the magic that will be surrounding them and judges it an excellent choice, and that’s aside from how stupid a Death Eater would be to attack goblins in their own territory. Filius is being taken by a pair of elves, Torfinny and Glorfindel, to his father’s home. Flitwick the elder might not be part of his original clan any longer, but he resides in one of the abandoned Gringotts branches beneath the earth.

“Glorfindel,” Salazar mutters into his mattress. “Someone was reading too much Tolkien.”

Glorfindel the house-elf gives Salazar an arch look. “Mother Filona says that Glorfindel is exceptionally well-named,” he sniffs, and then marches off to see to Filius.

Salazar makes an amused sound. “Filona would be entirely correct.”

Nizar grips Severus’s hand and shares a brief kiss while Sirius, Remus, Bill, Fleur, and Tonks politely pretend to be engaged elsewhere. “I’ll be back tomorrow at noon,” Nizar promises. “Don’t find any more melting floors before that time.”

“I will be busy murdering someone if another floor melts in this castle today,” Severus replies, lips curling up in a smile. “Take that fur cloak with you to the Heights. It will keep out the damned wind.”
“Excellent idea.” Nizar smiles, kisses Severus again because he can, and then allows Winky to take him out to the Heights. The wind on the top of the hill bites into him at once, but it’s also liberating. He doesn’t understand the sensation, but suspects it’s related to the magical title.

He’s still grateful when Dobby arrives with blankets, a partial tent with an open doorway, and Nizar’s heavy fur-lined cloak. Kanza all but leaps from Dobby’s bony wrist to join Nizar, crawling into his clothing for warmth. Dobby and Winky banter and mutter at each other while they erect wards for privacy and invisibility, then conjure wood for a small, cheerful fire placed on a rock right in front of the tent’s doorway.

Nizar curls up next to the rock and its fire, feeling the earth beneath him like a cradling hand.

There is nothing more he can do today but this. He lets go of the frantic stress of being a war mage untethered from his kingdom and closes his eyes.
In which Remus reveals why he was fine with sleeping in a ditch instead of the house he owns.

None of these of late have been getting an official comb-over beta, but @norcumi, @morgynleri, and @drougnor (i.e. the Mate) have been doing drive-by viewings. Any mistakes left are totally mine, and usually weird.

Also, yes, Elfric totally did it on purpose.

“You know, Elfric’s portrait called Sirius by his familial title in the presence of Madam Tyler and three war mages who have not yet been informed as to why he would be doing so,” Minerva says as they prepare to depart Hogwarts. Granted, those preparations are only Salazar attempting to change clothes without falling on his face, but he succeeds without breaking himself or giving up the whole of his dignity. Bless the creation of t-shirts and denims, one of the most easily interchangeable wardrobes he’s ever owned.

“And I imagine that, Madam Tyler’s discretion aside, they feel so wretched that the significance of such won’t occur to them until sometime tomorrow,” Salazar replies.

Minerva looks surprised. “Madam Tyler knows?”

“No, not yet, but I know the type. She’ll bide her time and pounce once she’s done contemplating all the possibilities.” Salazar tries not to sigh. “At which point, what with the lack of time travel in Amelia’s life, I’m likely to be accused of allowing a fifteen-year-old to get someone up the duff.”

Minerva looks to be biting her tongue in amusement. “Then, by all means, let’s get you that overnight rest before you have to defend your brother’s honor.”

The Side-Along Apparition is the least pleasant bit of magical travel Salazar has experienced in his entire life. He now quite understands why Nymphadora Tonks vomited many times in the process of collecting Amelia Tyler; it’s effort to keep from doing the same.

The moment the nausea passes, it’s replaced by relief. Salazar already feels more like himself, even if his sense of the earth beneath his feet is not the strength he’s used to. The important bit is that he can feel it at all.

“Where are we?” Salazar asks, glancing around. It’s a lower hill they’re on, but this is most certainly the upper Highlands. Sheltered in the lee of a crumbling old keep is a study cottage built from stone harvested from the nearby ruins. There are chimneys on both sides of the cottage, meant to keep the winter wind and snow at bay. He would guess the house was not built by magicians, even if it’s
obvious that it’s owned by one now.

“This is the other property I own aside from the house in Hogsmeade. It was built by my father’s
grandfather when they came here from Ireland,” Minerva explains. “I was born here, actually. When
my parents died, and my brother Robert had no interest in the property, I inherited it.” She draws a
set of keys from her robe, narrowing her eyes as she searches among them until finding the correct
key. It’s not modern steel, but an iron casting from the previous century.

“Magic on the lock and key?” Salazar asks.

“At my mother’s wise insistence,” Minerva replies, smiling. “My father might have been a minister,
but he was not fool enough to scoff at the sort of safety his wife was granting to their children. Use
of the key activates a number of wards that surround the house. You’ll be safe here, even if there
were no elves to stand guard.”

Salazar frowns, wondering if now is the right time to ask of her family. Then again, he knows that
often there is never a proper time. “I’ve not heard a word of Robert McGonagall and his wife in quite
a while. Not your niece Marjorie, either.” He knows they were not victims of the last war, but that is
all.

Minerva purses her lips as she pushes open the heavy door. “When our youngest brother Malcolm
was killed during the war, and my husband Elphinstone poisoned, Robert did what he thought was
best for himself and Agnes: he moved the family across the pond to the States. Marjorie had just
graduated Hogwarts, so she went with her parents and attended university in Massachusetts. She
chose to be a teacher, just like her dear Aunt Minnie. Marjorie is married with her own family now,
but not a one of them have visited Scotland.”

Salazar follows Minerva into the dark house, lit only by the meager sunlight streaming in through old
and thick glass windows. He blinks a few times and his vision adjusts, affording him details that
others would never be able to see. Sheets cover furniture in the sitting room with lines that are
antique even by his standards; the walls are uncovered stone, barren of portraits. An old and
Preserved tapestry of the McGonagall clan stretches across the wall above the fireplace. The rest of
the house is to his right. The kitchen is a later addition, blended magic and non-magical workings,
that is separated from the sitting room only by a covered table. A short hallway leads to three closed
doors, most likely a bathroom and two bedrooms. Except for the chill in the air, it’s a peaceful sort of
place.

He nearly flinches when Cindrilicus and Trinitus arrive before he remembers the elves were due to
join them. Trinitus’s ears dip in disapproval. “It is being quite dusty here, Professor McGonagall,”
she says.

Minerva lifts an eyebrow. “No one has been inside this house in at least two decades. I’m surprised
it’s not worse.”

Trinitus and Cindrilicus look at each other in perfect understanding. “We will be cleaning the
bedroom first, then the rest,” Cindrilicus announces. “The Professor Salazar will be lying down as
soon as possible!”

Salazar nods. “I do appreciate the thoughtfulness.” He feels better, yes, but there is a long sleep in his
near future.

He does wait until the elves scamper off to the closest bedroom before speaking again. “You’ve
never met them, have you? Your grand-niece and grand-nephews.”
Minerva sighs and shakes her head. “Not for lack of trying. It’s just never worked out. Every plan we’ve made to meet has been ruined by some ill-timed event. Oh, we exchange letters and photographs, and it’s good to see the three of them growing up strong and safe, far away from this bloody war. I’m grateful to have them in my life at all.”

It isn’t often that Salazar is surprised, but he is now. “You have my most sincere apologies, Lioness. I never realized before that you once wanted children of your own.”

Minerva gives him a fond look. “You needn’t apologize, I promise you. Elphin and I, we didn’t want to bring a wee bairn into a war. We told each other we could wait until the war was done. It was a reminder, a way of believing that the first war would end, that You-Know-Who couldn’t win. It’s no one’s fault that Elphin’s poisoning left him unable to father a child. We talked of surrogacy, but… after he died, my heart wasn’t up to the task of raising a child without him. I have plenty of them wearing Gryffindor colors, anyway.”

Salazar shoves his hands into his jacket pockets, fingering the dainty bit of metal lurking in the right-side pocket. “If it were to happen now, would it be unwelcome?”

Minerva laughs outright. “Oh, goodness. Salazar, I’m far too old now to be a mother!”

“You should not ask, then, what age I was when I last sired a child.”

Her laughter fades, though she still smiles. “I suppose that sounds ridiculous to your ears, doesn’t it?”

“I’ve had a great deal of time to become used to such things,” Salazar replies. “Though you’ve taken after a Slytherin’s way with words. You didn’t answer my question, darling Lioness.”

Minerva points her wand at the fireplace and lights a pile of stacked peat, which bursts into bright flame so quickly it must have been set in place to dry long ago. “I don’t know,” she says quietly. “It’s yet another war we’re in now, and I doubt I’m capable of carrying a child any longer. Why do you ask, Salazar? It’s certainly an odd thing to be questioning me about when I’m about to leave you in my parents’ home overnight.”

Salazar turns away from her, ostensibly to study the kitchen he might be using in the morning. “I’m a meddler, Lioness, a conniver of the highest order, and I make plans within plans to such depth that I think it would drive even Rowena mad were she to try and deal with it all. I learned long ago to leave nothing to chance, and still I’m often reminded that I’ve done so anyway. Tuesday night was one such reminder.”

He turns back around, holding out the dainty ring that he found in his reclaimed Gringotts vault in February. Salazar has no idea what member of his family placed it within the vault’s confines, but the moment he saw it, he knew it to be exactly what was needed. “My brother is very much the same as I. When he tells me he will outwit Death to undo a foolishly worded bargain, I may not hold out hope for his success, but I feel it nonetheless.

“For one of the few times in my life, I’ve no idea at all what the future will bring, and I won’t leave this to chance. I’ll not see another day pass without granting you the means to understand how I truly feel.”

Minerva reaches out, her fingers trembling, before she takes the ring from his hand. It’s goblin-minted gold, so that the metal shines true, bright and unyielding. Its center stone is a pristine ruby that is not large or ostentatious, but the perfect shade of Gryffindor scarlet. The two tiny stones that frame the ruby should clash, but the silver-wrapped green emeralds sit on the golden band as if they were never meant to be anywhere else.
“Is this what I believe it to be?” Minerva finally asks in a hushed whisper.

“I know I’m far too old for you, and it’s entirely scandalous for a man my age to seek a much younger wife, but I’ll ask it anyway: will you marry me, Lioness? It might be a brief happiness, but I’ll claim it like a greedy soul and be glad of it if you let me.”

Minerva swallows. “You are a complete fool, Salazar Deslizarse.” Then she slips the ring onto the third finger of her left hand, where goblin magic ensures that the fit is true. “But if you’re a fool, then so am I.”

“Foolish people in pairs make for excellent wedded couples,” Salazar says. Then he lifts her into his arms, spinning them in a circle until they’re both dizzy from it. Given the way the earth feels like it’s tilting beneath his feet, that was probably not something he should have done.

“Wait. That was a yes, wasn’t it?” Salazar asks, grinning.

Minerva scowls, strikes Salazar gently on the back of his head, and then kisses him as if it’s the only task left on earth. “Idiot. Of course I say yes.”

*          *          *          *

The trip south, as the hip kids say these days, sucks. Sirius isn’t capable of the long distance Apparitions the war mages could do until Tuesday evening, and Side-Along Apparition with a grumpy fucking werewolf all the way from Scotland to Wales is exhausting. It’s made worse by Remus’s temper, which is never grand close to a full moon. With the werewolf’s connection to the earth disrupted, he’s such a cranky shit that Sirius is tempted to upend him into the pond in Remus’s dead grandmother’s front garden.

“Thank you,” Remus says after they stumble through the front gate. Sirius wants to fall down in the worst way, but he can’t yet. He’s holding out until Remus is safe and unconscious. Then he can pass out on a floor someplace quiet. Probably as a dog. Dogs can sleep anywhere.

The grudging thanks makes up for some of the trip, but not all. “I’ll be a lot more amendable to your gratitude when you apologize for trying to bite me, you arse.”

Remus turns around on the garden path and gives him a confused look. “When did I do that?”

“Around about Yorkshire.”

“Oh. Fuck Yorkshire,” Remus mutters, and climbs the steps up to the house’s cheerful blue front door. Sirius shrugs and decides that a sudden, irrational hatred of Yorkshire is as good a reason as any.

The front garden, full of flowers and planted herb beds, looks exactly as he remembers it from the two trips he made out here before the war made visits impossible. The first time, it was himself, Remus, and James, just after Sirius’s victorious escape from his parents and Grimmauld Place in July 1976. Aside from Andromeda and Cousin Nymphadora, he didn’t see a Black family member again until Regulus made certain that Sirius received an invitation to their father’s funeral in 1979. They all managed to be civil for the occasion, but after Orion was lodged into the family crypt, Sirius got the hell out of there, and never saw Regulus or Walburga again. Their portraits don’t count, not when Walburga Black’s portrait was a screeching, hateful thing, and Regulus’s portrait was never updated.
to reflect his change of heart in regards to being a Death Eater. Hard to update a portrait when you’re already dead.

All of the plants look as if they’re in the midst of a midsummer explosion. “The garden looking like this during Easter Break in 1977 should have been a big hint, shouldn’t it?”

Remus snorts. “You were too busy staring at James and Lily. I didn’t realize you’d ever noticed the garden at all.”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Sirius agrees. He had been kind of distracted, dwelling in a state of complete disbelief that not only had Lily agreed to date James—who really should have had to put more effort into succeeding after being a wanker for five straight years—but Muggle-raised Lily was okay with a triad relationship. Even more distracting at the time was the realization that it was working. Sirius calmed down a hell of a lot, James suddenly understood how a mature adult was supposed to behave, and Lily—Lily was just amazing.

“Remus, why haven’t you ever lived here? I know you own the house free and clear. Not that I’m trying to kick you out of Grimmauld Place now that you’re not off wandering the wilds like a Biblical bloody prophet, but this place is a paradise compared to my part of London.”

Remus slices his finger open on a bent nail on the porch, smearing the blood on a short piece of wooden siding near the door. It lifts up with a slow creak of stressed wood, revealing a key hanging there like a bright silver lifesaver. “I’ve got my reasons.”

“What reasons are those?” Sirius asks. “Aside from ‘I’m a stubborn shit werewolf and I’m not good enough to have nice things.’”

Remus turns the key in the lock and pushes the door open. “Because she’s a bloody busybody, that’s why.”

Sirius is about to ask if it’s a neighbor, probably the same one who must be keeping the garden in top shape, when the ghost appears in the doorway. “Remus John Lupin!” the old woman shouts. “Just where in the Lord’s name do you think you’ve been for the last six years?”


“So you, your grandmother decided not to leave.” Sirius has always been very good at stating the fucking obvious.

“And you!” Eglantine Pryce, the source of Remus’s green eyes and impressive nose, points at Sirius. “Didn’t I tell you that you’d find yourself in big trouble if you didn’t watch your backside? Didn’t I?”

Sirius leans backwards. “Most people said that, Mrs. Pryce!”

“Yes, but I was right, and so were they.” Eglantine crosses her arms. “Well? Are you coming in, or not?”

Remus looks like he’d rather hide under the porch. “Yes, Gran. I’m coming in. Please try to be a bit less overbearing today. I feel like shit.”

“You watch your language, and I’ll think about it,” Eglantine replies.

Sirius blinks at her. “Have you maybe considered exorcism? Because I think this could be considered cruel and unusual punishment.”
“Hah! They tried,” Eglantine says, grinning. “It’s my house, and I’ll live here as long as I like, even if I’m no longer living to do it. Now, the pair of you get into my kitchen. There’s not a bite to eat in the fridge, but the non-perishables in the cupboard are just fine.”

“I can’t eat right now, Gran. I need to lie down in a bed and sleep, or I’m going to vomit like a bloody fountain,” Remus mumbles, traipsing down the hall. Sirius follows him, unsurprised that they still end up in the kitchen.

Eglantine was—is—a convincing force of nature. She still wears her hair in the same short curling bob straight from the 1960s, a non-magical styled dress made of printed cotton, and sturdy, sensible shoes that Sirius’s mother would have mocked as cheap and peasant-like. Sirius has never met a ghost who gardens before, but he’ll stake half the Black fortune on the fact that it’s Eglantine who does all the work.

Eglantine’s expression softens a little. “What have you gotten yourself into now?”

“Well.” Remus wanders over to the stove, finds the kettle, puts water in it, and then starts heating water for tea. Sirius, just for something to do that isn’t awkward staring, starts searching cupboards for a sealed tea tin. Stale tea is just not on, and it might make Remus sick up again, besides.

“Well, what?” Eglantine prompts when Remus just stands there, staring out the kitchen window like a Muggle zombie.

“I agreed to be a war mage for Britain, which was quite lovely, but then You-Know-Who had himself a brilliant idea and blocked our connection to the kingdom. It’ll be healed in a few weeks, but in the meantime, being run over by a double-decker bus would have hurt less.”

“Oh, dear.” Eglantine drifts over to the cupboard and taps it, giving Sirius a pointed look. He opens the cupboard and finds an air-tight copper jar labeled TEA in giant painted letters. When he pops open the lid, he smells the pungent strength of a good Irish Breakfast blend. There isn’t much left, but it has enough for a cup or three. Do ghosts drink tea? He’s never asked.

Maybe he should ask. That might be rude, though. He isn’t exactly read up on ghost etiquette.

He’ll make a third cup to be polite. Manners have literally saved his arse before; no reason to abandon them now.

“Thank you, Mrs. Pryce,” Sirius says to the ghost, and continues his search to find a tea strainer. Mugs. Maybe he’ll just pour a handful of black leaf into the kettle and try to read the leaves in their cups afterwards. He was always rubbish at Divination, but it was sort of fun to translate leaf glop into dramatic nonsense.

Lily always made a grand show of writing down Sirius’s predictions in a journal, saying that even a stopped clock is right twice a day. He can’t remember anything about that other than it happened. Fucking Dementors.

“My grandson, a war mage of Britain,” Eglantine finally says, distracting Sirius from his depressing thoughts. “They really let a werewolf be a war mage?”

Remus shrugs. “Her Majesty is a lot less prejudiced than most of Wizarding Britain.”

Rubinny and Choppy choose that moment to arrive, which distracts Eglantine from her interrogation of her grandson. “Oh, lovely house-elves! Are they yours?” she asks Sirius.

“No!” Sirius blurts out before the elves can take offence.
Rubinny is the one to glare at Eglantine. “We are free elves, Ghost of Powys.”

“We’re the Elves of Brae,” Choppy adds. “Choppy and Rubinny are here to help keep an eye on the war mage Professor Lupin while he rests.”

“Free elves.” Eglantine considers them both before nodding. “Well, then. Not much is going to be getting into my house, no matter what those fool Death Eaters have in mind, but you may stay and help watch over my grandson.”

The elves exchange glances, probably thinking that they weren’t planning on giving a dead woman much choice in the matter. “Thank you, Ghost of Powys,” Rubinny intones gravely.

“How come you never said you were a magician? Witch? Whatever term you prefer,” Sirius asks, now intent on distracting Eglantine from the elves. “I know Remus’s mother wasn’t magical, but he is, and Lyall, too, and then you had us idiot kids invading your house, so it just seems…odd. If you don’t mind talking about it, that is.”

Eglantine smiles. “I don’t mind at all. I was a late bloomer, I suppose. I never received any sort of invitation for magical schooling, and didn’t even realize I was capable of it until much later. When my parents died, I was quite alone. I didn’t really…friends were not so easy for me to come by. I decided to return to my love of books and gained an interest in the occult. Spells that weren’t supposed to work for anyone began to work for me, and that was that: I considered myself a witch. I built a broom and sort of continued on, doing what I liked. When I met my future husband, he thought my doing magic was quite the lark.

“When I discovered there was a Ministry of Magic that would most likely have disapproved of my shenanigans, I decided it was the sort of thing only family needed to know about. I didn’t even know my own mother had been of magical descent until, oh, 1968 or thereabouts, when I dug some old family documents out of the attic. My great-grandmother wrote of all her doings in Old Welsh. Even if you know the modern tongue, it’s not quite the same thing.”

“Yes, I know someone who complains about those differences a lot,” Sirius replies, grinning. “So, no Hogwarts letter. If you were a Squib, that would explain it, but you’re the first Squib I’ve heard of who was capable of casting spells and broom-building.”

“It’s wonderful what you can do when no one tells you that it’s impossible,” Eglantine says, “but enough about me. I am so sorry about your spouses, dear. I know James and Lily meant the world to you.”

Oh, no. Sirius can sit here and talk magical shop with a ghost, but he can’t take the idea of discussing Lily and James with a dead woman. “Thanks, and by the way, Remus is dating my cousin, Nymphadora Tonks. Andromeda Black Tonks is her mum.”

“You’re dating baby Nymphadora?” Eglantine exclaims in high-pitched shock. Remus slumps over the kitchen sink and lets out a groan of despair.

* * * * *

Nizar wakes to early morning light and assumes it to be Friday. If he’d slept beyond that and into Saturday, the elves would have roused him. Probably.
“Have you forgotten how to bleed into the soil you claim?” a testy voice asks.

Nizar doesn’t recognize who is speaking, but he glances over to see Dobby and Winky standing opposite the rock that still hosts its cheerful fire. They’re not treating the speaker as a threat, but they’re acting as if Nizar’s unexpected guest is a source of potential terror.

That bodes well. He should have dug a hole into the hill and slept there, instead.

“I’ve bled into this land so much, it probably soaked up enough of me to give all of the blood from my body to another,” Nizar grumbles, sitting up. He resists the urge to groan as his left arm protests. It will rain soon, then. At least he has a tent and a fire…and a guest.

Nizar looks at the old woman who joined him at some unknown point. She has eyes that are like pitch, colors that shift from green to murky gold to brown and back again. Her hair is stark white that shines with soft blues and violets in the early morning light, and has been carefully brushed and curled into an elaborate set of braids that hang from her uncovered head. Her skin is lined, but not weathered; he can’t determine her age at all. Her clothing is hidden by a full woolen cloak. Only her boots are visible, made of fine leather, but of a much older style than even the fashion-backwards magicians of this century prefer.

“If you’ve bled into it before, what’s stopping you from doing so now? Blood links us to the earth, and the earth links us to our strengths, Nizar Hariwalt Deslizarse.”

His migraine is a lesser evil than it was yesterday, but it’s still making its presence known. “Stupidity, most likely,” Nizar says. “But I want tea before I bleed on anything. Do you drink tea? Coffee swill? Honeyed water?”

The old woman smiles, wreathing her face in wrinkles that make her beautiful rather than decrepit. “You’ve no idea who I am at all, do you? Tea is fine, if your elves do not mind providing for another.”

“We don’t mind,” Winky whispers. “We’ll be bringing tea and breakfast for two.” She and Dobby vanish with a sharp crack rather than their usual, quieter departures.

Nizar shivers when a wet, cold wind sneaks into the tent. He pulls the fur-lined cloak back over his shoulders. “Why are the Elves of Brae terrified of you?”

“They probably fear I’m intent on eating them,” the old woman muses. “I’m not certain why I evoke that reaction in the smaller Green Folk, as I’ve never eaten a single one in my life.”

The elves return a moment later, placing small trays on either side of the fire so that they rest on the rock, not the ground. Both offerings are the same: a pot of tea with milk, sugar, and honey, which is much better than yesterday. The food is toast with butter beside it, and yet more broth—stronger stock this time with hints of meat lurking in it.

His guest regards the meal with curiosity. “It did such damage to you, then? I can sense a part of it, but if the elves of Hogewáp are not burying one in food, they must have good reason.”

“I was rather attached to the kingdom I’m meant to protect. Having that attachment blocked by a complete fucking imbecile is not something I recommend.”

She nods and then pours honey into a teacup. “Drink and eat. If you are fool enough to be without a blade, I have one that will suit.”

“I have not been that foolish since I was first granted one,” Nizar retorts, but there is no heat in his
He’s drank all of the broth, appreciative of the delicate strands of meat hiding within it, when she questions him again. “It is merely a block. Not a severance. That is a certainty?”

“It’s a comforting certainty, but we don’t know how strong the block is, or how long it will last. It’s too bad the one who cast the spell is probably dead, because I feel as my brother does—I’d love to kill the prick.” Nizar drinks the milk because it’s there, then adds honey to his first cup of tea and warms his hands while holding the delicate cup.

“I merely wanted to be sure,” his guest murmurs. “When I felt what was done, I feared it might be worse.”

Nizar glances at her in surprise. “You felt that severance?”

She sips her tea. “I also have a strong attachment to this isle. I’ve lived here too long not to have such.”

Recognition comes to him then. Unfortunately, it’s startling enough that he crushes the delicate teacup in his hands. “Fuck,” Nizar grumbles. There is now sweetened tea on his cloak, his knees, and on the ground. Most of the teacup’s shards have fallen into his lap, but several decided to jab their way into his hands. He sighs while yanking them out, watching blood well up in the shallow cuts. “Well, you wanted me to bleed on this earth.”

She snorts in amusement. “That is not the method I had in mind.”

“Whatever,” Nizar replies. He places his bleeding hands atop the grass and dirt of the Heights of Brae.

He can feel his connection to the lands of Brae strengthen. It’s a gentle song in his blood, a joy trickling into his senses. This is earth’s gratitude that it’s been claimed by a guardian once more. The title Godric had been gifted by Findláech was forgotten after the passing of Godric’s children, but the magical borders held, unbroken by the myriad wars and kings that laid claim to the land.

The Heights of Brae are part of what the war mages protect, even if Hogwarts and Hogsmeade elude all others but him. The migraine that has plagued him for days eases down to the annoyance of an aching head. An awareness of Britain, however small, takes up its rightful place in that barren part of his mind.

His guest is smiling when Nizar lifts his hands, revealing that the shallow cuts have been healed by the magic of the earth. “That is much better, isn’t it?”

“It is. I might have thought of it in a day or two, but not while feeling so utterly miserable.” Nizar wipes his hands clean on his trousers and then thanks Winky for bringing him another teacup. Dobby is trying to repair the one Nizar broke, but it probably won’t work. Intentionally or not, it was just used in a blood magic ritual. Ceramic is of the earth; earth remembers.

Nizar smiles and meets her pitch-black eyes. “I didn’t realize half-Veelas lived that long, Eithnemael.”

Eithnemael smirks in response. “I didn’t realize a Deslizarse could do the same, and yet, here you sit.”

“I blame insanity.” Nizar reaches across the stone, grateful when Eithnemael grips his hand. Her
fingers and palm still feel like unblemished silk. “It’s good to see you again.”

Eithnemael inclines her head. “And it is good to be in your company again, Protectoris.”
Sirius doesn’t know what to expect, but seeing the green fire of the Killing Curse tear through the air on the park’s upper level boils his blood. Maybe they can’t save those poor kids from Cornwall, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to let a Death Eater kill any child here today.

Chapter Notes

Double-header weekend!

Also this was originally attached to chapter 20, and would be the OTHER reason for the cackling.

Sirius still isn’t certain how he managed it, but after a brief dog-nap in Wales, he bid Eglantine a polite farewell—promising on his magic to visit within the next year—and Apparated back to London. He chooses the Apparition point in the garden across the road from Twelve Grimmauld Place and watches the house. He could have Apparated directly inside, now that the wards are a lot better at recognizing him and not trying to bounce him off into Essex or Surrey somewhere, but first he’d rather know if his house is being watched by Death Eaters.

Sirius rolls his eyes when he finds the pair on the walkway. They’ve had two wars to figure out how to dress Muggle, and still the dumb bastards stick out like hex-swollen thumbs. He studies them for a moment before Confounding them from behind, watching with grim humor as the Death Eaters stumble off down the walkway in opposite directions.

He might be nuts, but he fought in a war for three long years before Peter fucked everything up. He knows how to work around a problem; he knows not to leave bodies in his wake that would set off a Death Eater alarm and leave him with an army in front of his own blasted house.

Oh, God, but he’s exhausted. He never wants to Apparate from one end of Britain to the other in a straight shot ever again. That is what the Floo and bloody Port Keys are made for.

Sirius crosses the street, slowly recognizing that his sense of London County is crawling back up his feet and into his awareness. Once the initial scent of the Underground passes and replaces itself with hints of everything on the streets, it’s a comforting feeling. Still bloody odd, especially when he concentrates and gets a headful of people for his troubles, but it’s not so bad.

He opens the door and shuts it behind him. Then he closes his eyes and basks in the bright light of the entryway. It’s still wondrous to enter this house and not be confronted by his mother’s blasted portrait, to not feel like he’s walking into a dank, dark, mouldering pit of despair.

He still has no idea where the hell his mother’s portrait ended up after he moved it. He hopes she’s trapped between two walls somewhere, sulking like her painted life depends on it.
“Lord Black, sir.”

Sirius opens his eyes to look at Roderick Boyle. “Roderick, I know I’ve told you to call me Sirius.”

“Yes, but it isn’t proper when I’m on the clock,” Roderick replies, huffing out an annoyed sigh.
“Your mail is on the table in your preferred parlor. None of it was smoking in warning, and I didn’t see anything from those you’ve asked me to consider most important. Otherwise, you’ve not missed anything in the last few days. Oh, and Frances would probably like to know what you’ll be having for lunch.”

Sirius tries not to feel ill at the idea of lunch. “I can’t handle food right now, but you have my full permission to bang on the door and rouse me for dinner.” He thinks about it. “A very late dinner.”

“Done,” Roderick says, and then hesitates. “Is everything all right with Mister Lupin and Miss Tonks? It’s hard to miss the fact that they didn’t return with you, sir.”

“They’ll be all right. Tonks went to stay with her mum for an overnight, and Remus is dealing with his grandmother’s ghost in Wales tonight, which explains everything about why he decided to be a homeless vagrant for a decade.” Sirius mounts the stairs and glances down at Roderick. “He’s not going to win. It’s war, and it’s bloody terrible, but the bastard isn’t going to win.”

Roderick inclines his head. “I believe you, sir.”

Now I just have to convince myself. Sirius slowly climbs the stairs, making it to the fourth storey. He passes by Regulus’s old room, running his hands over the wooden door, before pushing open the door to his bedroom. He could have changed his bedroom’s location, or taken over the master suite now that Buckbeak is back in Hagrid’s capable hands, but he’s not ready for that much change. Just fixing the house is good enough for now.

Also, his bed always smells like fresh linens. Hired servants who aren’t cranky bastard elves is completely grand. He shrugs out of his robes, coat, vest, and shoes before dropping facedown onto his pillow.

Sirius must have slept, because the next thing he knows, Roderick is pounding on the door to announce dinner. He lifts his head and digs around in his abandoned clothes until he finds his pocket watch. Eight o’clock is not a late dinner; that is normal dinner.

No, wait, his family was mental and had five meals a day plus two separate acts of tea. He’ll need to speak with Frances and Roderick about what late dinner means in Black-speak.

He eats food that doesn’t make him ill. It might have been a steak and kidney pie, but after returning to bed and waking again on Friday morning, he can’t recall anything more specific about the meal than not-poison. Frances is an excellent cook, so her food is probably wasted on him. Twelve years in Azkaban taught Sirius to eat anything that wouldn’t eat him first.

A shower in the altered, redecorated bathroom, followed by clean clothes, do wonders for helping Sirius to feel less like a slug that crawled up from the sewers. He goes downstairs just in time for the owl post to come in. He collects three days’ worth of mail and sits down in the parlor to read.

Noise from the street catches his attention in the middle of trying to muddle his way through the day’s Prophet. No mention of the non-magical attacks, not yet, and no magical attacks reported. There is speculation that a few more countryside house-burnings were the work of Death Eaters.

Two magical children are listed as missing from a smaller village in Cornwall. Twins. Hogwarts-age. He doesn’t know the family name, which means they’re Muggle-born.
He fought in the last war. He knows what will happen to them, and there is little chance that they’ll be saved. He really should not read the bloody paper before tea.

The sudden loud ringing nearly sends him flying off the sofa. “Shit,” Sirius mutters, and goes back out to the entryway. That was the best place to put the telephone, closest to the front door, and thus nearest the street. He wouldn’t make some poor sod from British Telecom try to run telephone wire through this house, not even after Sirius did so much to improve it.

They also had to keep downgrading the actual telephone attempts, as the first three models died sad, jangling deaths. Remus started them off with a telephone that was charmed to work without electricity, the handset was wireless, and it came with a base which held some sort of recording device for taking messages. (Bloody ingenious, he’d thought.) That one lasted about six hours. Then it was a slightly older telephone, still with buttons to push, but wired to the base. The answerphone was a separate unit attached with extra wire. That one lasted twelve hours. Then they tried it without the answerphone, wondering if that was just a bit too much technology mingling with a great deal of magic. A push-button telephone without the convenient message-taking system lasted two days before it let out a few desultory brinnng noises and gave up.

Sirius ended up with what Remus called a rotary phone that is literally as old as they are. He doesn’t mind; turning the dial to enter each number is sort of soothing. It’s also sodding loud, audible even in the basement. He picks up the handset before it can ring again and deafen him. “Hello?”

“Lord Sirius. It’s Amelia Tyler.” She pauses. “I’m surprised you know how to answer a phone.”

Oh, she’s in a mood. He can tell, and it’s not only because she’s adhering to the strict protocol of calling him Lord Sirius instead of his preferred Lord Black. He doesn’t care if it’s incorrect; it sounds less pretentious, and normally, Amelia will indulge him. “My wife taught me before we got married. Answering telephones was a thing people did in the 1970s too, you know.”

“I’m aware,” she says dryly. “I have a question for you. I waited in deference to how visibly miserable the war mages were yesterday morning, but as it is now tomorrow, and I’ve caught you at home, I’m assuming there has been some improvement.”

“I left Remus with the ghost of his grandmother in Wales yesterday. He might argue that point.”

“A ghost. Right.” Amelia sighs. “Of course. Is there anything else your world is capable of that you haven’t informed me of?”

Elfric, you are a Slytherin arsehole, Sirius thinks. He knows Elfric called him grandfather deliberately, but he wasn’t going to ask the portrait why, not in front of Tonks, Fleur, and Bill. They all three didn’t even blink at the title, which just shows how much of his recovery Bill was bloody faking. Tonks will be on about it by this evening, if not sooner, if only to mock Sirius for hitting his dotage thirty years early. Fleur is the only one he’s uncertain of, but given how she thought she owed Harry a life debt regarding her sister, she’s not likely to care. Bill, though—Bill will want to involve Molly, and that is a nightmare he doesn’t need.

Hell, Nizar didn’t blink at the portrait outing them, either. That means his son was still doing poorly enough to not notice, or Nizar agreed with Elfric’s unspoken reasons. It would have been bloody nice if they’d shared their plotting with the rest of the class, though.

“Well?”

Sirius glances up at the ceiling, which is properly whitewashed and helping to reflect the light from the skylight over the stairs. “Amelia, there is such a list of things you don’t yet know of what
magicians are capable of, but let’s skip that part for now and start with ‘My son is gay.’"

“Then getting another teenager pregnant would not be the reason you were being referred to as Grandfather by a one-thousand-year-old portrait.” Amelia sounds like she wants a drink.

“Nope. Magical adoption, though. That’s a thing we do, and it becomes legally, magically, and biologically binding.”

“Bio—you know what? No. I’ll let that lie. Your son is fifteen and in no position to be adopting children!” Amelia retorts.

Sirius wonders if he should keep talking around this, or just let the cat out of the sack. Then he realizes he can’t. It’s not his decision, as it’s not his life the government would seek to complicate. “Actually, he would be Heir and Head of the Potter household, which, except for him, was entirely wiped out in the last war, so he would have legitimate reason to, yes. He would also by my only Heir, and while the Blacks still have two or three family members in Britain lurking about who aren’t the scum of humanity, it’s still a rather short list. All that aside, it’s not me you should be discussing this with. It’s him.”

“Fifteen-year-olds have that sort of autonomy in your world?” Amelia asks.

“Not usually, but it can happen.” That’s not even a lie. The circumstances are usually fucked up, but it happens. Dean Thomas will probably be approached about his legal status the moment the Ministry realizes the Morrow family is good at putting on a good show of sympathy, but not much else. “Look. I’ll ask him if he wants to discuss this with you. The decision is up to him. Is that acceptable?”

“Given that I very much want to meet the child Wizarding Britain was trying to make fight their entire bloody war? Yes, that is acceptable,” Amelia says graciously. “I’ll let you return to your morning, Lord Black. Thank you for your time.”

“Goodbye,” Sirius remembers to say—just before she hangs up. Maybe they use another type of telephone etiquette in MI-5.

_I’m so bloody glad you still think time-travel is just fiction, Amelia_, Sirius thinks. He doesn’t want to deal with the headache of informing the British government that time-travel is real.

Actually, he doesn’t ever want the British government to find out about that.

Sirius puts the handset back in its cradle and realizes he’s still hearing odd sounds from outside. He returns to the front parlor, tracking the new sound. When he pulls the curtains back from the window, it’s to find that there are children in the park across the street, playing with a flat disk of some sort that sails through the air. He can’t remember children ever playing in that park when he was younger.

Fuck, was Twelve Grimmauld Place such a decrepit pile of vileness that everyone in the neighborhood avoided a house they couldn’t even see?

“It’s Friday morning. Shouldn’t you lot be in school?” he wonders aloud, but Frances answers him when she comes into the room with a tea tray.

“It’s Easter break. It’s not until next week for Hogwarts, but the locals are already out in force,” Frances says, and then frowns at him. “Stop skipping breakfast, Lord Black.”

Sirius nods and lets the curtain fall closed. “Sorry. I still hate eating down in the kitchen if there’s no
Frances nods. “I understand completely. It’s a bit…big.”

Sirius snorts and drops back down onto the sofa and his abandoned pile of mail. “Then please, by God, have tea with me. It doesn’t help much to be up here, but at least the bloody sun is out today.”

Frances smiles and sits down on the nearest chair to the coffee table, pouring tea before he has the chance. “If the sun is out, I imagine every playpark in London is full to the brim with wild things masquerading as children.”

“No doubt about that.” Sirius is glad of the excuse for swallowing tea. Lily’s second child should be doing the same—no, he’s not thinking of the dates properly. Lily’s second child, had they lived, would be in Hogwarts, most likely a third-year troublemaker, just like his parents. Lily could deny it all she wanted, but she hung about with Snape for five years. She could find and make trouble just as easily as a Marauder, and she had a potions-making genius to help her hide the evidence.

The fact that there is a third-year Muggle-born in Hogwarts named Edward Black, Sirius thinks, is cruel fucking irony. Remus met Mister Black of Gryffindor properly while teaching Defence for Harry’s third year; he reported that the kid is the complete opposite of a Marauder. He’s also, according to his Boggart, terrified of clowns. Sirius can’t really blame him.

Edward Black doesn’t look like a Potter, an Evans, or a Black. Sirius is ashamed of how relieved he felt when he met the kid for the first time and didn’t see any recognizable features. Even his eyes aren’t quite the right shade of grey for a Black of Sirius’s bloodline. The lack of resemblance should have left him with more grief, but instead, it was just a relief. That is a fortunate Gryffindor who will never have to deal with the Black family baggage, and God, but there’s a fucking load of it.

“Eat,” Frances reminds him, shoving a roll into his hand. “Or I’ll tell the healer from St. Mungo’s that you’re not putting on the weight you still need to gain back from Azkaban.”

Sirius chews on the roll resentfully. “I’m not afraid of that walleyed bastard.”

Frances raises an eyebrow. “Sirius Black. I will tell Madam Pomfrey.”

“I’m bloody eating!” Sirius retorts, slapping preserves onto the bread roll with a spoon. “Merlin, woman, you’re evil!”

He manages a decent portion of the meal, but he always hated breakfast. That isn’t him not wanting to eat because of Azkaban, just old habits that won’t die. Granted, Frances probably won’t poison him at the breakfast table, which was always his aunt’s favorite time to see if the Black Heir was paying proper attention to his surroundings. Sirius is still so bloody glad Aunt Cassiopeia died the year before he broke out of prison, or he might have killed her himself. He already had the murder conviction; why not?

“Lord Black, stop bending the tableware,” Frances says in a dry voice.

Sirius looks down at the poor, bent fork. “Shit.” He gets out his wand and taps it so the fork resumes its normal shape. Frances was smart and bought something non-magical and basic for informal meals, given that he, Remus, and Tonks are disasters when it comes to the survival of kitchenware.

He jerks his head up from contemplating the stupid fork. Something’s wrong.

“Lord Black?”
Sirius drops the fork and stands, clenching his wand in his hand as he listens to what London County is trying to tell him. “There’s trouble, Frances. Bloody fuck, I’ve no idea where that is! Wait by the kitchen fire downstairs with the Floo powder. I’ll send a Patronus to you the moment I have a location, and you can tell Kingsley. I don’t want to deal with these stupid pricks all by myself. I mean, I will if I need to,” he adds, grinning. “There might be an old friend or two from Azkaban!”

Frances grabs up the half-emptied breakfast tray. “Please do not get killed, you literal noble idiot. I like my paycheck!”

“You would have been such a Slytherin. I don’t care what Emmaline says about Ravenclaws and the Vance family,” Sirius mutters. He bolts out to the entryway, grabbing the black battle robes he keeps on a peg by the door. He didn’t really think much on resuming the habit until the fiasco with Peter demonstrated that battle robes were an excellent idea, especially since he’d recently decided that he wanted to live.

He takes a quick glance down at his rune-carved, four-sided black walnut wand—so different from the first wand he’d been given at eleven. Ollivander made it for him on the sly when Sirius was still considered by everyone and their bloody grandmother to be a maddened murderer. Garrick knew better at once, but it took digging Pettigrew out of the works to really prove the point.

Sirius still has no idea what half of the runes mean. He took the course, and most of his memories of Ancient Runes are intact, but some of these runes were not in the books. He makes a mental note to ask Nizar or Salazar if they might be capable of translating his wand, and then Apparates directly to the feel of Londoners in danger.

He finds himself in an empty alley just off of a busy London road. The roar of traffic is partly muted by the houses on either side. Small favors, he supposes. It’s never good to enter into a potential battle while half-deaf.

Sirius runs down the alleyway, away from the traffic, and then the alley opens up to reveal a wide green area, multiple levels, and a cast iron fencing surrounding it all. The sign on the gate reads Barnard Park.

He stares at the sign a moment in shock. “In the middle of the bloody day?” he snarls, and then casts his Patronus. The large black dog, the mimicry of his Animagus form, sits down and wags his tail. “Frances, they’re at Barnard Park in Islington. I’m on the Richmond Avenue side. I don’t see anyone yet—” He winces when he hears a high-pitched scream. “Never mind. They’re somewhere up ahead. Warn Kingsley that I have no idea who’s involved, but they’re either out in numbers, or they’re fucking stupid wankers.” He sends the Patronus on its way with a flick of his wand.

Sirius doesn’t know what to expect, but seeing the green fire of the Killing Curse tear through the air on the park’s upper level boils his blood. Maybe they can’t save those poor kids from Cornwall, but he’ll be damned if he’s going to let a Death Eater kill any child here today.

He doesn’t rush. He knows he might lose his life if he goes in blind. He can’t run that fast anyway, not after twelve years of Azkaban. The healers think he might—might—get back to the point of health he had in 1981, if not the youth, but he’s not there yet.

Listen to yourself, Sirius thinks in bemusement as he hexes the first robed and masked Death Eater he sees. When did you become so fucking mature?

Sirius knows the answer to that question even as he turns his wand on the next Death Eater in line. Thirty-first July, 1995. He’d suddenly been confronted by the fact that he hadn’t done his duty to his son, and Harry would be the one to pay the price for his stupid, guilty silence.
The Death Eater he’d been pointing at while thinking those thoughts probably just got strangled to death by Incarcerous. Sirius feels a moment’s sympathy for the poor bastard, and moves on.

The next thing he finds isn’t a Death Eater, but a kid who’s hiding beneath a Muggle spinning thing that Lily called a merry-go-round. Sirius snatches the girl up and Apparates, landing on the roof of a building on the other side of the green lawn. He can see the whole of the park here, both levels, and there are still far too many people running from too many fucking Death Eaters.

Sirius looks at the girl as he puts her down on the roof. She stares up at him, pale brown eyes wide in her dark-skinned face. She has multiple short braids with silly little pink barrettes at each end. “Are you a wizard?” she breathes. “You’ve got a robe and a wand and everything!”

“Yes, I am, but I’m the good kind. Those idiots with the masks and the cloaks? Not so much.”

The kid looks miffed. “I knew that, mate,” she retorts, revealing a hint of the melting-pot accent where Cockney meets West London, and then the immigrants spool everything together in a glorious mess that Sirius loves.

“Lay low, okay? My mates and I—who are very late, shame on them—will come and get you when those wankers are gone.”

The girl nods. “Can you find my friends? They’re hiding, too.”

Sirius grins. “Consider it done.” He Apparates straight back down to the park, Statute of Secrecy be damned. The Ministry can yell at him later; right now, he wants these kids to live.

“Black!” He turns and then ducks on instinct. The Auror who joined him while he was rescuing the girl catches a hex on her wand, sends it spinning into the earth, and then fires something a lot more vicious back at the Death Eater. The woman screeches and is temporarily distracted by her cloak being on fire.

“Good work, Urquhart,” Sirius praises her. “How many are with you?”

“Myself, Higgs, Randall, and Mirfield. If it looks like we’ll need more help, I’ll fire off a Patronus,” Urquhart says.

“Good. I’m going after the kids before these fucking arseholes get it into their heads to put in a body count before they vanish on us.”

Urquhart nods, smiling. “Excellent. Good luck, Lord Black. Keep your head down!”

“Been keeping it down longer than you’ve been alive,” Sirius replies, but she’s already off to duel the Death Eater who managed to put out the fire. He takes a quick look around as he searches for kids, noting that the Aurors aren’t the only ones fighting. A black man in Muggle clothing who looks like he might be his first rescue’s father is in the thick of things, lips curled up in a snarl as his wand slices through the air in quick defence. Spells are flying in all directions. This is the sort of melee battle Sirius had once enjoyed like a complete sodding idiot.

It’s tempting to join in, but his duty is to the people first, a responsibility he can feel in his bloody bones. He finds two kids hiding beneath some contraption made of plastic, but it provided good cover. He yanks them up and Apparates before they can think about running or kicking, dropping them onto the roof next to Pink Barrette Girl. He finds adults, Muggle parents to the kids, and stuns them before taking them to the roof, too. They’d panic, otherwise, and he doesn’t have time to deal with panic. Kids are great about not bothering with panic and snorting on his clothes until the battle’s done and everyone is safe.
He goes back to the park, stuns another parent, and picks up the toddler she was protecting. Then he’s on the roof again, using his wand to lay out the stunned woman next to the other adults. That gives him three adults, a toddler, two girls, and a boy. “Anyone else?” he asks Barrette Girl, who is holding the hand of a younger, pale-skinned boy with brown hair.

She points down at a teeter-totter. “Behind the tree.”

“Got it.” There he finds a pair of boys, and what might possibly be a body. Shit, he hopes that man is still alive. He doesn’t want to see these kids become orphans. He takes all three of them back to the roof, which is starting to get crowded. The moment he has the man down, he’s listening to his chest. Heartbeat. Not a happy heartbeat, but Sirius will take what he can get.

“That’s all the kids I know of who are still here,” Barrette Girl tells him. “All of the big kids ran off the moment the guys in robes showed up, calling us bad words.”

Sirius glances down at the man still slinging curses in the company of the four Aurors, then at Barrette Girl. “Is that your dad down there, kid?”

She beams at him. “Yep. I’m Harriet.”

Sirius reaches out and shakes Harriet’s free hand. He’s bugger-all at guessing a kid’s age, but he thinks she’s maybe eight. “I’m going to go help him out, Harriet. You’re in charge up here. Make sure all of these kids stay down low, all right?” He glances around. “Wait, I have a lot more kids than I have adults. Did I miss anyone?”

“Harriet’s dad is supposed to be watching us,” one of the boys whispers. He has a shock of white-blond hair and terrified blue eyes.

“But we belong with them,” another boy says, pointing at his unconscious parent. “Don’t worry. I’ll sit on my Dad.”

“Got it. You lot, listen to Harriet, and drop down onto this roof.” Sirius Apparates back to the park to discover another Death Eater has joined the fun. He shifts to Newfoundland without thinking about it and tackles the new arrival, biting at the man’s face and making that stupid mask fly off to land under a swing.

“Not me, you idiot!” the Death Eater yells. “Go after them!”

Sirius backs off, whining. He smells like Dominic Bole and he looks like Dominic Bole, but Sirius has met that wanker. This man doesn’t speak like Dominic Bole.

The Underground. This one has to be one of Salazar’s people.

Whoever they are, he can’t destroy their cover. Sirius shifts back and bounds the maybe-Death Eater with a weak Incarcerous. Then he snatches up their wand and shoves it into his pocket. “Hold that thought,” Sirius tells them in a cheerful voice. Then he turns around and marches straight at the clusterfuck that is an angry wizarding parent and four hard-edged Aurors.

A new Death Eater Apparates in behind the Muggle-dressed father of Harriet. Their wand is already raised in the familiar motion that always leads to a fatal Avada Kedavra.

When asked about it later, Sirius has no idea how the fuck he realized what was going on, who he was saving. He hadn’t even seen the man’s face yet. All he knows is that he lifts his wand, his heart pounding, and shouts, “CARADOC! DUCK, YOU FUCKING IDIOT!”
Caradoc Dearborn, Hufflepuff member of the Order, presumed dead since July 1980, doesn’t hesitate. He drops to the ground; Higgs and Mirfield are smart enough to do the same. “HIT THEM, SIRIUS!” Caradoc yells.

Sirius has a better idea. He blasts the ground right in front of the new Death Eater with the strongest Reducto he can conjure. The Death Eater still finishes casting the Killing Curse, but their aim is now blocked by a sudden wall of rock and dirt. The green light bounces off the wall and strikes a Death Eater to the right of Caradoc. The Death Eater’s shriek is brief. They’re dead before they land in the grass.

“Ho, shite!” Randall whips his wand through the air, catching the next Death Eater in line. The Death Eater crashes into the fence before vines come alive, pinning them in place. The force of Randall’s spell grants the vines enough strength to snap the Death Eater’s wand. Sirius feels his lips pull back from his teeth in a dog-like grin of pleasure.

He still has to deal with the idiot who likes throwing the Killing Curse around. For a moment, his mind goes entirely blank. Then he recalls Nizar’s embarrassed admittance of turning a literal Gryffindor into a tree.

Sirius can’t manage an entire tree, but he can sure as hell Transfigure that Death Eater’s feet into tree roots that are embedded in the soil. The Death Eater spews out gurgled swearing as she loses her balance and falls over backwards. Mirfield grabs her wand and pockets it before she can counter the partial Transfiguration.

Mirfield glances up from his work of binding the Death Eater with another bit of Incarcerous.

“Who’s the Death Eater you tied up over there—oh my God.”

Sirius feels it before Mirfield finishes speaking. The cold steals through his limbs and stabs him in the heart. He breathes out a plume of cold steam as the air around them turns to frost.

Emptiness. Everything is gone. There is nothing. Nothing.

He’s vaguely aware of dropping his wand from nerveless fingers as he turns around, staring up at the dark shape floating above him. Its tattered grey robes blow in a nonexistent breeze; its hood is nothing but fathomless black.

Maybe if he’d seen it coming, he could have managed a Patronus. Instead, all Sirius can do is stare at the Dementor as it comes closer.

He hears shouting, but it’s distant. Far away. Unimportant. There is only ice and despair. The Dementor reaches out its skeletal hand, its bony finger almost touching his face.

“SIRIUS!”

Sirius is jolted out of the Dementor’s trance when someone roughly shoves him back. He lands in a wide sprawl on the hard ground, banging his elbow on a rock. The jolt of pain that shoots up his arm snaps him entirely back, the fog of the Dementor’s presence gone from his mind.

He looks up to see someone tall, dressed in a leather coat, denims, and trainers. Sirius catches a flash of short black hair before the man shouts, “EXPECTO PATRONUM!” like they’re the two most important words in the universe.

Sirius has heard it said that way before. By Harry. Because Harry loved him.

The air turns a brilliant white. Then the light solidifies into one of the largest fucking lions that Sirius
has ever seen, a male with a proud mane. It leaps at the Dementor, ethereal claws extended, and slashes through the Dementor’s robes.

When the Dementor shrieks, Sirius slams his hands over his ears. He’s heard that sound so often. So much. He doesn’t know how anyone else can stand it.

Then it’s gone. The park is warm, just like it had been when he arrived.

Sirius is too terrified to move. He might also have pissed himself, but he can’t bring himself to be all that concerned.

Some Magical Duke over London he is. He wonders if you can get sacked from that sort of posting.

He realizes someone is gripping his arms at the wrists to pull his hands away from his ears. Then they’re saying his name.

“Sirius. Open your eyes. I will make you if you don’t, I swear to bloody Merlin. Sirius Orion Black III, you open your eyes and prove to me that you’re not a fucking soulless corpse!”

“Rude,” Sirius whispers. “Soulless corpses don’t curl up in terror.” He opens his eyes and his heart tries to stop beating. He’s heard the expression, read it in a few books. None of those stupid books mention that it bloody well hurts when it happens!

Black hair. Pale skin. Dark green eyes. Tall forehead. The straight and proud Black nose that Sirius hadn’t inherited, which was one of the few features he’d like to have received, thanks.

He’s older now, but it suits him. His forehead always made him look too grown-up as a kid.

“You cut your hair?” is the first idiotic thing Sirius asks.

“Long hair is really not in fashion right now if you’re living on the non-magical side of things.” Sirius’s rescuer tilts his head. “That goatee makes you look really bloody stupid.”

“It does not,” Sirius protests, letting the owner of the gigantic lion Patronus pull him to his feet. “It makes me look long-suffering and gloomy, like a proper Black. You look healthy and happy, so you’re really not living up to the family’s standards right now.”

Sirius takes a breath, reaches out, and grips the taller man by his arms. “I’m not dead, right? I didn’t miss out, get eaten by a Dementor, and wake up dead, did I?”

That earns him a bright grin. “Nope.”

“Oh. Good.” Sirius nearly bursts into tears, tightening his grip. “Regulus Black, you have some serious fucking explaining to do!”

Regulus gapes at him. “I just saved your arse, and you’re making puns?”

“I couldn’t help it!” Sirius shouts back, his voice turning hoarse as old damage catches up with him. “You’re supposed to be dead, and so is Caradoc, and what the entire fuck, Regulus?”

“Where did you put my kids, Sirius?” Caradoc yells, but Sirius is busy hugging his stupid dead brother. Who had best really not be dead, because his sanity’s had about all it can take.

“I’m really not dead,” Regulus assures him. He smells like sweat and leather, some odd cologne, and somehow—still—like the abandoned bedroom on the fourth floor in Grimmauld Place, the one Sirius never lets anyone clean.

“Shit.” Higgs sounds dazed. “Uhm. Do we arrest him?”

“For saving the Magical Duke of London County?” Randall blurts out in horror. “Are you out of your bloody mind?”

“See, I’m off pretending to be dead, and you decide to go get named a Duke by the Queen, so who’s really doing the oddest thing, here?” Regulus asks.

Sirius leans back to look up at him. Dammit, he’s still annoyed that Regulus decided to be the tallest Black in several generations. “Kreacher is going to be so pissed off at you.”

“Oh, that was a low blow.” Regulus looks sheepish and regretful. “Yes, he really will be.”

Sirius scowls. “I’m really bloody pissed off at you, too!”

Regulus shrugs in response. “You can punch me later. It’ll be just like old times.”

That drains away most of his anger. “No,” Sirius rasps. “I don’t want to punch you. I just don’t want your dumb arse to be dead any longer.”

“All right. Done,” Regulus agrees, and then he sighs. “Salazar is going to fucking kill me.”

Before Sirius can finish putting together what that means, Caradoc suddenly grips his arm. “Sirius, seriously: please tell me where the hell you put my kids.”
Plotting a (Re)Union

Chapter Summary

“Good God. You’re still an utter wanker.”

“Takes one to know one, you sodding twit.”

Or:

"Only the wisest and stupidest of men never change." -Confucius

Salazar wakes to the annoying realization that Minerva’s parents had been gods-awful morning people. The sun rises above the hills, breaches the glass window, and shines directly onto his face. He supposes the cottage is old enough to predate a proper alarm clock, but he’s never understood why people prefer to begin their mornings half-blind.

He finds the bathroom, which was last modernized before World War II, but has been scrubbed within an inch of its cast-iron life. The bath faucet insists it doesn’t understand the point to hot water, so he sighs, fills the tub with cold water, and casts a Warming Charm. That was a habit to his existence he didn’t mind leaving behind when modern plumbing began to spread the idea of hot water boilers, and here he is, in a Highland cottage in the middle of nowhere, doing it again.

Cindrilicus and Trinitus have breakfast waiting when he decides he can face a meal, though it’s obvious they’re still listening to Poppy Pomfrey in regards to what to feed a recovering war mage. He doesn’t mind; toast, broth, and tea are still at the limits of what he can tolerate. He hopes the others are faring better, but gods, he still aches. If there is one thing in his odd life Salazar never expected to experience, it was to lose contact with his sense of the earth.

It wasn’t merely painful. It had been bloody terrifying.

“Professor Salazar should be going back to bed,” Trinitus says when the meal is done. He ate more than he expected, most likely because he slept through the rest of yesterday afternoon, and all of the night besides.

“That is an amazing idea,” Salazar agrees. He goes back to the bedroom the elves cleaned for him and falls back into bed without bothering to pull off his denims. It not as if it’s the first time he’s slept fully dressed.

He wakes later to a ringing phone. It’s such an unexpected sound that at first he stares at the white-washed ceiling, bewildered. There are no lines out in this bit of the Highlands, no phone in the cottage—

Oh. Right.

Salazar rolls over and fishes around in his jacket until he finds the still-trilling mobile phone. He flips it open while thinking, once again, that Daffyd had the best bloody idea ever when the man decided to take a flight to the US in early January, intent on supplying the Underground with a much less obvious and far more secure way of communicating than random Patroni. Daffyd bought out an entire storefront of their supply of brand new Motorola mobiles and brought them back to Britain.
They all took turns prodding at the mobiles with magic until they figured out how to make them work anywhere, regardless of satellite or signal tower. Battery life was a lesser problem in comparison, one much easier to solve.

It’s a good thing that the mobile kept ringing, as it takes him several more moments of half-aware blinking to recognize the number on the phone’s tiny display. That’s a London exchange—Black’s brand new land line that Amelia Tyler insisted upon.

Salazar answers the call and puts the mobile to his ear. “Please tell me that nothing else has gone wrong in the last day, or I’m staging a revolt of the sort that is the pathetic sight of a grown man weeping in despair.”

“Well…yes and no, Saul. Good news: no one is dead. Bad news: I’m alive again.”

Salazar slaps his hand over his eyes. “Robert, I’ll kill you.”

“I thought you’d want to, but then my brother would be sad,” Regulus replies. “And considering he was nearly eaten by a fucking Dementor in the middle of London this morning, I’d prefer to avoid that sort of thing right now.”

Salazar sits upright in a hurry, tossing aside the quilt he’d tangled himself in. “A Dementor in London?”

“And a full squad of Death Eaters, but the Dementor was the biggest surprise,” Regulus reports. “They attacked Barnard Park, Saul. They attacked a park full of kids in full fucking daylight in the middle of London. Sirius got the children and a few non-magical adults out of harm’s way, and the new Aurors who joined in with the Phoenix lot were prompt, but they were still outnumbered.”

“Gods wept,” Salazar whispers.

“Karl was at the park with his kids. He had to out himself, too, or he’d most likely be dead. Geoff was there as well, all dressed up as Dominic Bole, but he managed to Disapparate while we were distracted by that fucking Dementor. Geoff’s identity is secure, but one of the other surviving Death Eaters escaped us. It’s a safe bet to say that I’m off the spying roster.”

“Shit.” Salazar rubs at his forehead, feeling the ache in his skull try to return with reinforcements. “Could you not have avoided it, Rob?”

“I almost didn’t make it in time, Saul, and I Apparated to the park the moment I got Karl’s Patronus. No one else was close enough to deal with that bloody Dementor. Hell, the shock of it—the Aurors are damned good at their jobs, and still they froze up. Pun intended.”

“Please no puns, not now. You said no one died—does that include the Death Eaters?”

“Fortunately not. Sirius accidentally strangled a Death Eater to death with Incarcerous, and one of the cloaked idiots killed their fellow Death Eater with an earth-deflected Killing Curse. The others made it through the battle alive. We’re letting the Ministry handle the arrests as well as the panicked non-magical adults so they can feel better about themselves. Honestly, the kids coped with it all better than any of us.”

Salazar flops back down onto the bed. “The bloody Ministry. Do they know the full extent of what went on?”

“I didn’t have a choice in regards to myself—the bloody Aurors who helped clean up the Death Eater mess recognized me thanks to that reporter, Spencer, putting my picture in the paper with one
of the articles about Sirius. Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived and put the fear of God and Merlin into them, though. Those four will keep mum, and I was able to get out of there before anyone else from the Ministry turned up to ruin that bit of subterfuge. I don’t think anyone but Shacklebolt recognized Karl, but he didn’t say a word when Karl used his proper identification.”

“Just…bloody wonderful,” Salazar mutters. He would be so much more capable of dealing with this mess if it were already Saturday, or if Riddle hadn’t messed about with the kingdom’s magic in the first place. “Are Karl and Trinity relocating?”

“Packing up as we speak, just in case,” Regulus confirms. “Sirius offered them a place here at Grimmauld Place. He says if their cover is blown, there is plenty of room, and that Fidelius Charm isn’t going anywhere. I wasn’t certain the new charm was going to let me in, and I’m linked to this house by blood!”

“The Order of the Phoenix still meets at Grimmauld Place,” Salazar reminds him.

“Yes, but they meet in the basement kitchen, Saul. We put up a few spells on the second storey landing to discourage anyone from wandering further, and Karl’s family can stay out of the Order’s hair, and vice versa.”

Salazar frowns. “You speak as if you’re planning to stay in that house, as well.”

Regulus is quiet for a minute. “Sirius asked me to, Saul. I just—bloody fuck, I couldn’t say no. Cat was already out of the sack, besides. I don’t know how much of a hurry I’ll be in to say hello to the rest of the Phoenix lot, and Sirius is leery about that, as well. There is supposed to be a meeting here tomorrow morning, and Sirius is worried he wouldn’t be able to keep the shock of it all off his face. He wants to see how he handles the rest of the day before he decides if his presence at the meeting is worth the risk of exposing my existence.” Regulus snorts. “If I’m worth the risk. Sirius nearly gets eaten, and he’s already worried about my arse!”

Salazar smiles, pleased. “That’s a man who is thinking properly. I worried he would be too shocked by the entire mess, particularly with the Dementor’s involvement.”

Regulus laughs. “My idiot brother says that at least this time it was just the one Dementor. Last time they tried to eat him, it was about fifty of the floating pricks!”

“And his reaction to you?” Salazar asks.

“Well, he hugged me instead of hitting me, so not too bad, really. Can you make it down to London, Saul? You’ve been off-grid since Tuesday, and aside from that bit in the Prophet about Riddle doing something to the war mages, none of us know what the hell is going on.”

“I’m not certain—wait, hold on.” Salazar sits up again as a Basilisk Patronus crawls into the room. “I’ve a misty visitor.”

The Basilisk opens its mouth and speaks to him in Parseltongue. “Time to feed the ground, Sal. It isn’t a cure-all, but it will help.” The Patronus then glides back out through the nearest wall.

“Feed the ground—oh.” Salazar considers slapping himself in the face again. He’s not had to think much on that particular lesson since he first properly introduced himself to Britain under Myrddin’s watchful eye. Within a mere two centuries of travel, he’d introduced himself to the earth in most of Europe and Asia, and the necessity was largely forgotten afterwards. He hasn’t had to introduce himself to new earth since his first visits to the Americas, and that was centuries ago.

“Saul? You still there?”
“Yes.” Salazar finds his boots, which are empty of his boot knife. It’s on the bedside table with his wand, both of them meant to be in easy reach while he slept. “If I join you in London, it will be much later this evening. Tell Karl the decision on where his family lives is up to himself and Trinity. You’re right that Grimmauld Place is secure enough. The biggest concern is the Order, but they tend not to be underfoot unless a meeting is called. With Kingsley now in charge of that scheduling, he’ll know to warn us in advance.”

“Staying here keeps their kids in the same school, and I think they were worried about that. I did ask if it might endanger them to stick it out, but Trinity doesn’t think Death Eaters are smart enough to try to find someone by lurking about at a primary school. They sure as fuck never thought of checking out Muggle primary schools to find Harry Potter.”

“They didn’t, no,” Salazar agrees. “I’ll see you this evening, Rob.”

“Got it. See you then,” Regulus says, and the line goes silent. Salazar gives his mobile a faint smile before closing it. He did his best to teach Regulus proper phone etiquette, but despite being raised on a plethora of intricate manners, the lesson never holds when it comes to a phone call.

It doesn’t take long to get dressed, tucking everything away where it belongs. Salazar tries to make the bed, but the elves will no doubt return afterwards to fix his pitiful attempt. Then he goes outside, bracing himself against the wind that immediately strikes him in the face, playing with strands of his hair. He should probably trim it back again, but hasn’t yet made a decision on its length.

He kneels down on the ground and uses his knife to open a shallow cut across his palm, deep enough to bleed without harming the fragile tendons beneath. Pressing his bloodied hand to the grass and dirt restores his lacking sense of balance at once. He sighs, grateful for the land’s playful recognition. The magic in the earth joins itself to his blood, making Salazar feel much more like himself.

When Salazar lifts his hand, the cut has healed itself, though a faint red, fading line remains. He sits in place for a while, pondering the nature of the Highlands. A visit to his ancient home in Gipuzkoa would probably not be amiss, but there is no time for it. He will work with what he can, as he must, as he’s always done.

“Cindrilicus?”

The older elf appears at once, peering at him with perceptive eyes. “Yes, Professor Salazar?”

“Much as I might regret the Apparition, I’m asking you to help me return to Hogwarts. Things have occurred this morning with consequences that must be attended to.”

Cindrilicus nods and holds out his hand. “I will make it a gentle journey, Founder.”

* * * *

Sirius makes it up to the ground floor just in time to hear Regulus bid goodbye to someone on his mobile telephone—without actually saying it at all. Lily would have slapped him on the head for that. “If that mobile of yours survives the night, I want one.”

“We might have to make another run to the States, then. They don’t sell these in the UK yet.” Regulus raises an eyebrow when Sirius presents him with one of the two cups of tea he’s carrying.
“Can I trust in your tea-brewing skills?”

“Regulus, I’m English. If I couldn’t make a proper cup of tea, they’d revoke my citizenship.” Sirius waits until Regulus takes the cup before he sits down on the stairs next to his brother.

That’s not going to stop being amazing for a while. A bit terrifying, and awe-inspiring, but mostly amazing.

Regulus is looking around again, taking in the cherrywood bannister and molding, the restored wallpaper that is far more colorful than its morose and filthy Victorian predecessor, the clean rugs and floors, and the absolute lack of their mother’s portrait—or the wall—by the front door. “I still can’t believe this is the same house. Are you sure this is Twelve Grimmauld Place?”

“You saw it on the outside before we came in,” Sirius says.

“Yes, but it looked too clean on the outside, too!” Regulus protests, grinning. “Geomantia Magia. That’s bloody amazing. I knew you could make magical space with that mastery, but I never realized you could manipulate everything this way.”

“I didn’t either, not until a fellow Geomantia Magia pointed out the obvious,” Sirius admits.

“You mean your son told you that you were being an idiot.”

Sirius sloshes tea out of his cup in surprise. “You know about Nizar?”

Regulus nods. “I’ve known for a while. Not because everyone in the Underground knows, nothing like that. When Salazar realized I was family…well. He has a thing for that.”

“Does it count, I wonder?” Sirius muses. “There is a magical adoption, but if you’re my son’s uncle, then…”

“Don’t tell me I’m sort of an uncle to my House Founder. It was bloody odd the first time I realized that, and it never stopped being odd, so…no. Just no.” Regulus fetches his wand from his jacket pocket and cleans up the spilt tea. The new wand isn’t anything like Regulus’s old one, which Sirius had privately thought to be hideous. The old vine wand had curved in an odd spiral, and carved lines cut across the spiral instead of following it. Sirius has seen Hermione’s wand enough to know that Ollivander could have done something a hell of a lot nicer than what Regulus had held.

Sirius has no idea what happened to the old wand, but Regulus’s new wand is straight, about a foot long; it’s carved from natural sprucewood that isn’t hidden under varnish. It's not decorated except for the handle, which is based on warped growth knot from the original tree branch. Black lines spider out from that smoothed black center to wrap around the handle.

“Not from Ollivander’s, I take it,” Sirius comments.

“No.” Regulus returns the wand to his coat. “I couldn’t exactly go to Gregorovitch, either. He’s too well-known, and too close to everything that went on here, for all that he was off in East Germany during the war. I went to Wizarding Rome in Italy. Best collection of wandmakers you can find when they gather for one of the conventions.”

“I’ve never been. Is it nice?”

Regulus takes a sip of tea and then elbows him. “It is, and you will, unless you’re going to off and develop another death wish on me.”
“No, I’ve had about enough of that,” Sirius says. “Besides, it’s a lot harder to mock the dead.”

“Only if you’re worried about them still having a body to be speaking to directly,” Regulus counters.

“You weren’t here to listen to me scream at Mother’s portrait,” Sirius says.

“Where did you put her portrait, anyway?” Regulus asks. “And the wall, for that matter.”

“I’ve no bloody idea. I just wanted her gone, and after I was done…” Sirius shrugs. “We haven’t found a hint of that portrait anywhere in the house, and that includes the fathomless cavern that pretends to be our attic.”

Regulus frowns. “You’re remarkably all right with this. With me, I mean.”

Sirius just stares at him. “Regulus, my son grew up a thousand years in the past.”

Regulus is startled into laughing, nearly making his own mess with tea. “All right, that’s a fair point. No hard feelings about how long I faked my death?”

Sirius takes a moment to think about it. He’s not necessarily been good at that in the past, but he’s trying. “Were you planning on coming back once Twit Riddle is dead?”

“No hard feelings about how long I faked my death?”

Sirius smiles and salutes him with the teacup. “Then I’m fine with it. I might’ve been in prison for twelve years, but I do understand the tactics of war. You don’t out your spies unless you have to. I assume Salazar is the reason you didn’t die in an Inferi-infested cave?”

“Yeah. He says it was a close call, too.”

Sirius smiles and salutes him with the teacup. “Then I’m fine with it. I might’ve been in prison for twelve years, but I do understand the tactics of war. You don’t out your spies unless you have to. I assume Salazar is the reason you didn’t die in an Inferi-infested cave?”

“Of course I was!” Regulus looks shocked that he would consider otherwise.

Sirius takes another sip of tea and puts it aside, suddenly not in the mood for tea at all. “You don’t remember?”

Regulus shakes his head. “The potion—I assume Kreacher told you about the potion?” Sirius nods. “The potion is called the Draught of Despair, but Riddle did something to it, something new, and one of the potion’s new traits made it opaque. You couldn’t even see what was in the fountain without drinking your way to it. By the time I drank my way to the bottom of that stupid fountain to retrieve the Horcrux, I was bloody hallucinating and blinded by thirst. I would have drunk that lake, Inferi or no Inferi, if Kreacher had let me.”

“It was about timing,” Sirius realizes. “If Salazar had rescued you in front of Kreacher…”

“Kreacher wouldn’t have been able to lie about it. Not after I gave Riddle permission to call for him,” Regulus finishes, nodding. “It was a very near thing, me dying. The funny part is that I’m the one who suggested we should put a copy of Slytherin’s Locket into that fountain to retrieve the Horcrux, I was bloody hallucinating and blinded by thirst. I would have drunk that lake, Inferi or no Inferi, if Kreacher had let me.”

“It was about timing,” Sirius realizes. “If Salazar had rescued you in front of Kreacher…”

“Kreacher wouldn’t have been able to lie about it. Not after I gave Riddle permission to call for him,” Regulus finishes, nodding. “It was a very near thing, me dying. The funny part is that I’m the one who suggested we should put a copy of Slytherin’s Locket into that fountain, so Riddle would think he had his House Founder’s support. I didn’t know who I was making the suggestion to at the time, but that’s when Salazar told me who he was.”

“That must have been a fun conversation.”

“It was bloody baffling!” Regulus exclaims. “Think about how people would have reacted if Godric Gryffindor had turned up in the midst of the Order of the Phoenix during the first war.”

Sirius makes a face. “It would have been absolute chaos and hero-worship, so I take your meaning.”

“Exactly. Also, I didn’t know I had any bit of Divination talent until Kreacher presented that
Horcrux to Nizar in Hogwarts, and it turned out to be the actual fucking locket. I then was given the homework of backtracking everything I’d said regarding objects and the potential actions of people, just to see if I’d done it any other time.”

“Was there?” Sirius asks, curious. Salazar claims that all magicians have a hint of divinatory talent, but Sirius can’t name a single instance of when he might have done so himself.

“Yeah. I predicted why you broke out of prison, even if I didn’t know the when,” Regulus says. “Revenge,” he adds. “I didn’t know who you were ready to rend limb from limb, but I was right on the vengeance part.”

Sirius swallows. He really doesn’t want to say the next part, but he needs to know. “Why did you leave me in Azkaban?”

Regulus’s shoulders slump. “I didn’t want to, especially after Salazar told me that Nizar once told him exactly why you were there, and who was truly the guilty party when it came to the Potters. But—time travel, Sirius. Nizar remembered that you were in Azkaban until the summer of 1993. Salazar once found out the hard way that you can’t change history. Maybe you can go around it a bit, but you can’t change it. It’s an exercise in frustration to try to save someone who’s meant to be dead only for them to die anyway. If you hadn’t gotten out on your own, though, I would have fucking well gone in to get you.”

“Thanks,” Sirius whispers. He doesn’t think a single word is enough for the whole of his gratitude, but at least it’s genuinely meant. “For wanting it, even if it couldn’t be done. Thank you for not fucking up my son’s future.”

“You’re welcome.” Regulus finishes off his tea and prods at the single tea leaf in the bottom with his finger. “No, nothing there today. Thank God; I hate it when things show up in my food.”

Sirius grins. He’d forgotten that Regulus would find anything to change the subject if the emotions involved were too intense. “Are you looking forward to meeting my son properly?”

“That portrait tore me a new arsehole with the power of speech,” Regulus says. “I’m looking forward to it as much as I’m dreading it. Though, I did meet Harry. Before, I mean.”

Sirius tries to keep breathing. “You did?”

“He didn’t know who I was, and wouldn’t recall it now even if there wasn’t an amnesia difficulty. I was using Polyjuice,” Regulus explains. “I gave him a granola bar in the park one day when I realized those fuckers that Dumbledore made him live with weren’t feeding him again.”

Sirius stares at Regulus and then tackles him with a hug. “You bastard. Thank you. Thank you for doing what I couldn’t.”

“It wasn’t much,” Regulus protests in a muffled voice.

“Idiot.” Sirius releases him when Regulus starts whinging about needing air. “It was enough.”

Regulus rubs the back of his head, looking as awkward at thirty-four as he did at sixteen. “It didn’t feel like enough.”

“Shut up. I like your Patronus, by the way,” Sirius teases.

“The lion?” Regulus ducks his head. “That was a surprise for me, too, but the star Regulus is part of the constellation Leo.”
“Our Patronuses literally mirror our birth stars.” Sirius considers the notion. “It’s too bad we had a family full of evil idiots who couldn’t cast a Patronus. It would be neat to see if that held true for all of us.”

“Too bad you probably couldn’t trust half of the portraits in this house about their answer,” Regulus says.

Sirius picks up his tea again, which is lukewarm and revealing that he put too much sugar in it. “So…”

“So…” Regulus echoes, just as lost for topics of conversation as Sirius.

“So, I tried to kill Severus with Remus as a werewolf in our fifth year,” Sirius blurts out. He has no idea what possessed him to say that. Maybe he didn’t think this was awkward enough.

Regulus stares at him. “You did—you—Sirius, WHAT THE FUCK! Who even does that?”

“I KNOW!” Sirius yells back. “Trust me, I bloody well know that it’s fucked up! I’m just sick of the family tradition of bloody secrets, and I don’t want you not knowing this shit!”

“NO! Not that part!” Regulus hesitates. “Well, yes, that too, and I appreciate the thought, but Sirius: Severus was my friend. Is. Was. I don’t know; he’s tetchy. He might be glad to see me, or he might poison me.” Regulus takes a calming breath. “I know what Dumbledore was like. Did you at least apologize to Severus?”

Sirius winces. “I’m trying not to be a prick to him.”

“That—” Regulus slaps his hand over his eyes. “Goddammit, Sirius, that is not an apology!”

“I’m working on it!”

“How can you still hate Slytherins so much?” Regulus asks in disbelief. “Not only is your son a literal Slytherin, but I’m one, too!”

“Yes, but he’s my son and you’re my brother, and family trumps House bullshit!” Sirius retorts.

Regulus gives him a dry look. “And how long did it take you to come to that realization?”

Sirius snorts. “This year.”

“Good God.” Regulus sighs. “You’re still an utter wanker.”

“Takes one to know one, you sodding twit.” Sirius glances at Regulus. “Speaking of me being a wanker: Kreacher!”

Sirius discovered by accident that while Kreacher might have gladly fled to Hogwarts to escape being forced to endure the blood traitor living in Twelve Grimmauld Place, saying Kreacher’s name would still cause the house-elf to return promptly—if only to be angry and mutter about it all.

He is no less prompt this time. Kreacher appears on the landing in front of them, already scowling, mouth open to complain…when he spies Regulus.

The old elf’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Is this a nasty trick from the blood traitor?” Kreacher hisses.

“Come on, Kreacher, you know better than that. A house-elf always knows who you really are.” Sirius grins. “Regulus and I were just talking about you!”

Kreacher’s ears drop, as does his jaw. “This is really being Master Regulus?”

Regulus glares at Sirius. “This is revenge for the last war, isn’t it?”

Sirius nods. “Absolutely. Besides, it’s best to get this sort of thing out of the way quickly. Like ripping off a plaster.”

“I hate you,” Regulus mumbles, and then smiles at the house-elf, who is staring at him with huge, glistening eyes. “I’m really sorry, Kreacher. The Dark Lord had to believe I was dead, and he would believe you, and…well, I’m not dead?”

Kreacher bursts into ugly sobbing, complete with oversized tears. Then he flings himself at Regulus’s leg. “THE MASTER REGULUS IS NOT DEAD! KREACHER DID NOT FAIL MASTER REGULUS!”

Regulus cringes and then pats Kreacher gently on his ancient, fragile shoulder. The house-elf’s reaction is to continue to cling to Regulus’s leg and wail like a banshee. “No. You never did. You did exactly as you ought, and that’s why I can be here to tell you so.”

* * * *

When Severus crawls out of bed in his own quarters on Friday morning, he can’t decide if he feels better or worse than yesterday. Then he realizes that it’s bloody ten o’clock in the morning and decides he’s not making that decision until he’s had tea. His head is throbbing, but it’s a caffeine headache’s teeth-gnashing accompaniment to whatever lingers of what Riddle did to them.

“Poppy is still giving you orders?” Severus asks Chorry, who he thinks is possibly related to both Choppy and Dobby. Their eyes are certainly bulbous enough, and the color matches, as well.

Chorry nods, placing the tray of tea, thickened broth, and toast down on his table. “Madam Pomfrey is being sensible instead of harsh,” the elf says. Severus raises both eyebrows in surprise, startled to hear a house-elf admit that some of Poppy’s feeding methods have been bloody overbearing. “She is thinking that tomorrow might be easier, but we elves are thinking Sunday.”

Severus decides he doesn’t want to witness that battle. “Thank you for the late breakfast, Chorry.”

“Professor Snape is welcome,” Chorry replies, and Disapparates.

He luxuriates in the shower in a way he wouldn’t have time for during a normal school week, and then gets dressed. He’d rather linger in his quarters, suspecting he’ll be asleep again before the lunch hour is done, but he’ll go stir-crazy if he stays here without knowing the state of Britain after another night of Voldemort’s free-reining insanity.

Seeking information requires finding Minerva, which means he’ll discover if all classes were canceled for the week, or if those capable of it are still teaching. He hopes it was a full cancellation, or there are idiots on staff who will never stop gloating about his falling behind on the job. They keep forgetting that Severus doesn’t have to fatally poison anyone to make them regret their existence for a little while.
Apparition still feels unwise, so he walks to Minerva’s office instead. Given the sheer number of students he has to wade through to get there, it’s safe to assume that no one is in class today. He wonders how much whinging they’ll endure when the school year is extended by a week to make up for this impromptu vacation…or if the Easter break will be shortened to make up for this week’s lack.

No, probably not. He doesn’t believe the parents who are looking forward to seeing their dunderheads will be in much of a mood to agree to that without coming after Hogwarts staff with torches and pitchforks.

Either the students were warned, or the expression on Severus’s face makes it clear that he isn’t in the mood to converse. A surprising number of students greet him or say that they’re glad to see him up and about, but they don’t linger, or even seem to expect a response.

Severus stomps on the urge to wonder why they’re glad to see him. He knows exactly what Nizar would say to that, and it darkens his mood further. He literally hasn’t slept in this castle without knowing that Nizar resides somewhere within it since age eleven. He doesn’t consider himself to be clingy, but he doesn’t care for this shit at all.

Thank fuck that Minerva’s office is on the first storey. He opens the door when she responds with a brisk, “Come in!” to his sharp rap on the door.

Minerva looks up at him and smiles. She isn’t wearing her hat, which is resting on a shelf behind her. “Severus! It’s good to see you moving about without looking like something a cat dragged in.”

“You have literally dragged me in, so I imagine you would know,” Severus replies, seating himself when she gives him a pointed look of instruction. He can’t help but sigh the moment he’s off his feet. No, he is not yet recovered. He’s so fucking glad that Easter Break begins next week. He could possibly be teaching again by next week, but he would loathe every moment of it.

Shit. He forgot the Monday morning classes that occur before the students prep for the train. For the first time in his entire career, he considers canceling a lesson of his own volition.

“How are you? And don’t lie, because it’s beyond obvious that the answer is not fine,” Minerva adds tartly.

“I’m better than I was Tuesday, Wednesday, or even yesterday afternoon, but no, I am not fine,” Severus admits. “I was honestly contemplating canceling Monday morning’s Potions classes.”

Minerva puts down the quill she’s using, not to write in an essay, but in one of her own journals. “I wouldn’t do so, though not from a lack of understanding how you feel. Set them an easy lesson that not even Mister Finnigan could set afire, or set them a final research project to complete over the week of Easter break.”

“Actually, thank you for the reminder. I was going to be assigning the last of their bloody holiday homework during the rest of classes this week until Nizar’s favorite walking corpse decided to be a complete fucking prick. I’ll be writing up their assignments over the weekend and pass them along to the other Heads of House. Monday morning’s classes can dabble in something harmless.”

“That leaves you with very few choices, most of them resulting in students with off-colored robes, skin, or hair,” Minerva points out, smiling.

“Better than missing limbs,” Severus retorts, and then frowns as he notices Minerva’s left hand. The ring is goblin-minted gold set with a perfect, pear-cut ruby; the stone has excellent clarity and a
rich scarlet color that’s becoming rare. Certain draughts are beginning to suffer because of the growing price to get the right quality of stone for brewing. The ruby is braced by two small, silver-wrapped stones with the true blue-green glow of proper emerald beryl.

Minerva notices where his attention has gone and raises an eyebrow. “You know, you’re the first to have noticed.”

“It’s literally my job to notice everything.” Severus isn’t fond of jewelry, but the stones—those are absolute perfection. He imagines the ring is at least five hundred years old. “Salazar?”

Minerva smiles. Her blue eyes are all but glowing with joy. “Yes.”

“Then Aurora owes me twenty Galleons.”

Minerva flings her quill at him, an excellent shot that bounces off the top of his head before he can shield himself, but she’s laughing. “Were you gambling on my love life, Severus Snape?”

“No, Aurora and Charity are betting on your love life. I was merely placing wagers regarding the possibility of an engagement,” Severus replies, smirking.

Minerva rolls her eyes. “I’ll throttle them both.”

Severus declines to offer assistance. He isn’t up to throttling anyone right now unless Voldemort literally volunteers for it. “I don’t know how Salazar had the mental prowess to manage to ask you that sort of question yesterday, but I am happy for you, Minerva.”

She looks up from her brief study of the ring. “No matter how long it lasts?”

“We could all die tomorrow,” Severus responds dryly. “Yes, Minerva. No matter how long it lasts.”

Minerva scowls at him as she retrieves her quill with a wandless spell. “I decree that none of you fools are allowed to die tomorrow. I’d prefer it not be until we’re all very old and happily slumbering in our beds, but tomorrow is completely unacceptable.”

Severus jerks back in his chair when a house-elf pops into Minerva’s office with a passenger. “Salazar?” Minerva stands up at once, brow furrowed in worry. Severus is also mildly concerned, but he isn’t moving from this chair until it’s required. “You weren’t meant to be back until this evening!”

Salazar gives Cindrilicus a brief nod of thanks. The elf is appeased, and Disapparates just afterwards. “I was, but—”

Dumbledore barges straight into Minerva’s office without knocking. “My apologies, but there is a situation in—”

“—London,” Salazar finishes. “Yes, that.”

Dumbledore looks surprised. “Salazar, I hadn’t realized you’d returned. How did you know of London? Kingsley just informed me by Floo.”

“Because I carry a bloody mobile phone everywhere I go,” Salazar answers, dropping down in Minerva’s other chair before he rubs at his forehead with his fingertips. “Do you know the identity of those two dead Death Eaters yet?”

“A mobile phone?” Dumbledore repeats in bafflement, at the same time that Severus says, “How the
hell did you get mobile phone signal in the bloody Highlands?”

“Excellent charms work,” Salazar answers. “Albus Dumbledore, please save your curiosity regarding a portable phone until later.”

Dumbledore frowns. “Very well. We have identified the bodies, though Kingsley is asking the Unspeakables to test for Polyjuice impersonation before he makes the information publicly known. The deceased Death Eaters are thought to be Dagger Fleet and Albert Runcorn.”

“If there truly is a way to determine Multa Facies Sucus regarding a dead body, I bloody well want to know about it,” Salazar insists, glaring at Dumbledore. “I know of London because two members of the Underground had to intervene. One was present because he was, unfortunately, visiting Barnard Park with his children when the attack began; the other because it became necessary to ensure that Sirius Black was not eaten by a bloody Dementor in the middle of London this morning. Her Majesty would have had such wonderful opinions of us if we’d allowed her distant kinsman to be murdered in broad daylight.”

Severus no longer feels the slightest bit tired; too much adrenaline is thrumming in his veins. “A Dementor was in Barnard Park in the middle of the fucking day?”

“And the London children are already out for their Easter holiday. It would have been a slaughter if Black hadn’t become aware of the attack at once,” Salazar adds, blowing out a long sigh. “Frances Vance alerted the M.L.E. Sirius rescued most of the civilians while Kingsley’s four Phoenix-aligned Aurors assisted a very angry father of a magician in dealing with the Death Eaters.”

Minerva has her hand resting over her breast. “But there were no fatalities on our side, or among the non-magical, were there?”

“No.” Dumbledore looks relieved by that. “Aside from the Death Eater fatalities, there were two captured ones as well: Heliotrope Rothschild and Augustus Rookwood.”

Severus snorts in disbelief. “Neither of those idiots would have seen action since they were arrested during the first war.”

“I imagine they were eager to prove themselves useful,” Salazar says in agreement. “Instead, they nearly proved themselves to be fertilizer.”

“They might still become that if Riddle decides to kill them through their Dark Marks,” Severus mutters.

“He has yet to do so, which tells us that Toms’ eyes remain on the Ministry,” Dumbledore says. “If he still intends to seek out the prophecy in the Department of Mysteries, there is no reason why he cannot also attempt to free his followers from Ministry confinement in the process. Severus, there is something you should know.”

Fuck. “How bad was the news for last night? How many are dead?”

Dumbledore seems surprised by the question. “There was only one death. I imagine, given the identity of the victim, that Tom made… a spectacle of the affair.” He reaches into his voluminous robe pocket and pulls out a rolled-up copy of Friday’s Prophet. “It is front page news, unfortunately, but at least they were kind enough not to print pictures of the scene.”

Severus unrolls the paper and holds it out so that Salazar can also view it. He doubts this particular bit of news came up if the Underground was more concerned about London.
FORMER HEADMASTER OF DURMSTRANG

IGOR KARKAROFF MURDERED

DARK MARK FOUND ABOVE SCENE OF THE CRIME

*That isn’t a crime, that is a favor,* Severus thinks, but Dumbledore would say far too many words about Karkaroff’s better nature. The difficulty is that Karkaroff really didn’t have one.

“Killed not far from Little Hangleton before midnight last night,” Salazar observes. “That’s a bit bold of them.”

“Kingsley tells me that no member of the M.L.E. can find the Riddle Manor, so it must still be under the Fidelius Charm,” Dumbledore says as Severus gives him back the newspaper. He has his own copy somewhere, but has no interest in learning of how Karkaroff was tortured to death. It’s far too mindful of how close he is to sharing the same fate.

“There will be an Order meeting tomorrow morning, but Kingsley has not yet decided upon a time. I imagine we’ll all know when that occurs.” Dumbledore shoves the newspaper back into his pocket. “Now then: a mobile phone? As in a portable telephone?”

“It is exactly that, and you can’t have mine. Go buy your own,” Salazar responds. Dumbledore leaves, looking far too cheerful about the prospect of having his own mobile phone.

“If he buys one and brings it here, I’m poisoning you,” Severus says flatly.

“If Dumbledore brings a mobile phone here without applying the proper charms first, it may well melt itself to death,” Salazar counters.

Fair enough; that’s certainly an appealing visual. “Did Dumbledore have any objections to his unexpected visit with Aberforth yesterday?”

Minerva emits a ladylike snort of amusement. “He returned to the castle as if nothing at all was amiss, even though his spectacles were crooked and his hat was missing. I’ve not heard from Aberforth, but I suspect it was not a pleasant reunion.”

“I didn’t think it would be,” Severus agrees. “When is this wedding to take place?”

Salazar gives him a startled look before glancing at Minerva. “I thought you would have tortured them a bit more,” he says, but seems pleased to see the ring on her hand.

“I didn’t announce a thing. Severus is the first to notice its existence.” Minerva shakes her head. “Sometimes I worry about the rest of our staff.”

“You know everyone is distracted when even our bloody magpie of a Headmaster didn’t notice you were wearing something shiny,” Severus drawls.

Minerva glances down at the ring, frowning. “I’d be quite pleased if Albus never noticed it at all.”

“Not possible, I’m afraid, not when it will soon be a legal matter rather than a mere betrothal.” Salazar slumps back in his chair and grins at Minerva. “Would you prefer a wedding of paperwork, or a wedding of ceremony and paperwork?”
“It’s the middle of a school term as well as a war. Even if I was fond of the idea of a ceremony, we don’t have that sort of time,” Minerva replies. “Why? Are you in any sort of rush?”

“Given that we’re at war?” Salazar nods, not a hint of humor remaining on his face. “Yes.”

“An excellent point.” Minerva sighs. “Not to sound as if I’m not fond of the idea—which I am, or I would not be wearing this ring—but paperwork, quietly filed, will do nicely for now. I’d rather keep it out of the newspapers until it does not endanger either of us. I won’t put a further target on your back.”

“We could file paperwork with the non-magical courts on Monday afternoon when the school’s Easter break becomes official,” Salazar offers. “Or I could forge the lot of it and file it today, and the end result would be the same.” He then lifts his hand and holds it out, watching it tremble in place. “Well, perhaps not today.”

“Forging it all?” Severus asks, curious.

Salazar shrugs. “I’ve three false identities on this isle, and each one has a driving license, passport, and a fully established credit history. You really do learn interesting things if you’ve the time for it, which includes knowing exactly how to track down the sort of people who are quite skilled at their craft.”

“Is that why Nizar has a credit card?”

“He now has two, given that Hadrian’s Wall gifted him a second one by far more legal means,” Salazar says. “Besides, you tell me a better method of establishing his modern existence when my brother’s last contact with a creditor of any sort was Nizar chasing the extortionist bastard down with a sword.”

“Good Lord, why didn’t anyone stop him?” Minerva asks, trying not to laugh.

Salazar raises both eyebrows. “Stop him? Lioness, that man had infuriated so many that the townsfolk each wanted to assist in the process of making this particular tax collector quite dead. Only a priest’s intervention stopped it from being a slaughter.”

Severus is suspicious by nature, and he’s been watching the Hufflepuff ghost’s behavior for a while now. “Is that how Nizar met Jonathan the Friar of Hufflepuff?”

“Might’ve been,” Salazar answers in a mild voice.

“Oh, you can’t leave it there. If I’m to deal with non-magical court documentation regarding a marriage on Monday afternoon, you’ll tell me how that came about!” Minerva insists.

“Bear in mind I didn’t get to witness the fun. I was off in Castile, forcing my fellow countrymen to acknowledge Marion as my titled wife, else I’d leave them buried in shallow graves,” Salazar explains. “And that last bit is exactly why Nizar didn’t accompany me, as he would have been far too inclined to assist. Nizar was instead in Sheffield with Elfric…meeting with a necromancer, I believe. I don’t recall if he was the teacher Elfric chose to learn from, but it was a visit of enough length for Nizar to discover that a local tax collector had taken it upon himself to collect quite a bit more of the king’s due than the king actually asked for, and not a bit of that excess was seen by King Edmund at all. My brother is well-mannered enough to begin a confrontation politely, but Elfric said it didn’t take long for that to spiral out of control. It was Jonathan, a very young priest at the time, who asked Nizar to stay his hand—he said that the Almighty would grant justice to the people of Sheffield.
“My brother told Jonathan that he’d best name his sword such quick, because otherwise the rest of the townsfolk were going to rip that idiot tax collector to bits with their bare hands.”

Minerva laughs aloud. “That sounds like a very Slytherin way to begin a friendship.”

“No, that would be the future Hufflepuff apprentice who decided to be Slytherin about things. Jonathan waited until he thought Nizar wasn’t looking, pulled out the wand he’d crafted for himself, and hid the idiot tax collector under a good Disillusionment Charm. It’s quite difficult to tear a man limb from limb if you can’t find him.

“Alas for Jonathan, my brother is not that unobservant, nor does he easily take no for an answer.” Salazar smiles. “Godric and Sedemai were so bloody thrilled. Jonathan was the first Christian priest to visit Hogwarts in over ten years. He pursued an apprenticeship with Helga for healing, and returned often afterwards—at least until he grew careless, got caught fixing the pox with his wand, and died for it.”

“You don’t sound overly sad about that last part,” Severus notes.

Salazar lifts his hands in a vague gesture of acceptance. “Jonathan, when he decided to turn up in our halls as a ghost, was the very first to admit that he’d certainly earned his fate, unwanted though it was. He was glad to serve as a lesson to the more arrogant of our charges, evidence that even a man of the cloth would be promptly burnt to cinders if he was suspected of evil. Jonathan might even have avoided the burning, had he chosen to be a rich priest, but he preferred to remain a monk. That was his other lesson for our students: while the Christian God thought well of the humble, the Church certainly didn’t give a fuck.”

There is a firm rapping on Minerva’s door, which is a great improvement over Dumbledore’s version of knocking. “I didn’t realize my office was going to be King’s Cross Station this morning,” Minerva says. “Come in!”

Nizar opens the door and peers inside, grinning. “Jonathan says that you lot are talking about him and he can tell, because it feels like someone is walking over his grave. I told him he didn’t have a grave, he had a bit of ash that the wind made off with, and he needs to stop carrying tales.”

Minerva makes an amused noise. “Can you lot perhaps *not* speak so callously of the dead?”

“He is my dead friend and I can mock him all I like. He gave me permission to do so, and that has never been rescinded,” Nizar counters.

Severus realizes he is staring at Nizar in disbelief. “How in the hell are you so bloody chipper?”

“Because I bled on the Heights, and then on school grounds when I came back. Didn’t Salazar tell you to do the same?”

Salazar places his hands over his face. “No, because I forgot to do so myself. I came directly to this room from the north. I know why I’ve returned early, *hermanito*, but what brought you back from the Heights so soon?”

“I woke up to a visitor this morning.” Nizar pushes the door open wide, revealing that there is an old woman standing next to him. “Meet my visitor.”

Severus examines the woman, who mere stares back, unperturbed. She has hair of solid white that is pinned back in elaborate braids, and her eyes are nearly as black as his own. Her face is pale, lined with age, but it’s odd—he suspects that if the lines were smoothed out, there would be no other sign of aging. He doesn’t even think a freckle would dare to alight on this woman’s skin. Her hands,
gripping a tall and sleek oak staff, are similar; they reveal she is aged, but there is no sign of arthritic gnarling or loss of dexterity. She wears a full grey cloak that hides everything she wears except for the tops of dark brown boots, which aren’t the least bit modern. They’re far younger than Nizar’s boots, but not even magicians have worn shoes of that style in at least two centuries.

“Visitor.” Salazar looks like he’s bracing himself. “Did you truly think this school needs two blood mages who are also *Picti Magia*, little brother?”

“Hah!” The old woman grins. “At least he bloody well recognized me!”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Forgive my inconvenient amnesia, you horrific wench. Professor Minerva McGonagall, Master of two branches of Transfiguration and current holder of Hogwarts’ Southern Seat of Gryffindor; Professor Severus Snape, Master of Potions, Master of Mind Magic, war mage of Britain, and current holder of Hogwarts’ Western Seat of Slytherin; this is Eithnemael of the Stone Hill, a clan of Veela who dwell near Edinburgh. She is a Pictish magician by way of her father, Master of Blood Magic, Master of Mind Magic, and apparently just for the fun of it over the passing centuries, now holds Masteries in Enchantments, Astronomy, and what she calls Elemental Transfiguration. Oh, and she’s my daughter-in-law, but that part never ceased being odd and we do our best to ignore it.”

Severus finds his voice first, if only out of well-trained habit. “A pleasure. I didn’t realize half-Veela had such long lifespans.”

Eithnemael inclines her head. “Not all of us are capable of such, but who am I to bow to what is expected of me? I did so once before, and I’ve regretted it ever since.”

Minerva sounds faint. “What, exactly, is Elemental Transfiguration?”

“Oh. Transfiguring one element of the earth into another,” Eithnemael says.

Salazar frowns. “That is Alchemy.”

Eithnemael readjusts her hands on her staff, smirking. “Alchemy requires one or more items one wishes to change into a singular new thing, accompanied by a magical catalyst. I am speaking of turning a single element into another element entirely.”

Salazar raises both eyebrows. “So you’ve spent the last thousand years learning to literally turn lead into gold.”

Eithnemael shrugs. “I only work with lead when things are dull.”

“You’re focusing on the wrong thing entirely,” Nizar interjects, still looking far too amused about dropping an ancient half-Veela onto their figurative heads. “Sal: what does Hogewáþ need?”

“Teachers,” Salazar answers at once, and then he stares at Eithnemael. “You once swore you would never do such ever again.”

Eithnemael scowls at him. “My husband had just been murdered! I’m allowed to change my mind over the course of nine hundred eighty-three years!”

Salazar rises slowly to his feet and reaches out with both hands. Eithnemael hands her staff to Nizar, who leans on it while Salazar and Eithnemael grip hands in a manner that was probably forgotten a millennium ago. “Welcome back to Hogewáþ, Eithnemael deSlizarse of Eidyn Burh and Honored Mage of the Stone Hill. I hope this return brings happiness rather than despair.”
Eithnemael’s playful façade cracks a bit, revealing that sombreness and a deep, abiding pain lurk beneath. “Thank you for greeting me so, Salazar Fernan, Keeper of Hogewâþ’s Western Magic. I hope we will not have cause to regret anything that is to come.”

“Nor I.” Salazar reaches out and escorts the pair inside, shutting Minerva’s door. “Those wards of yours, Minerva: they’re sturdy enough to keep out the prying eyes of the long-bearded?”

“Severus has assured me that the wards on my office are active and strong each time my door is shut,” Minerva responds, glancing at Severus. He nods; if those wards fall, it means that the walls fell with them.

“Excellent. Little brother, I came back early because one of the Underground called me. There was an attack in London today by Death Eaters.”

Nizar sighs. “Of course. Riddle wasn’t going to hide in the shadows forever.”

“Igor Karkaroff is dead, too,” Severus chooses to add.

“Yes, but that’s not bad news.” Nizar eyes Salazar in suspicion. “What are you not telling me?”

“That Sirius Black was nearly eaten by a Dementor this morning.”

Nizar goes still, his expression firming up even as his eyes take on a faint silver edge. “Nearly?” Severus hides a grimace. He saw that expression in December, at the Tower of London. Nizar was preparing to kill Death Eaters in order to protect both himself and Severus. Dammit, Nizar has become attached to the fucking bastard.

At least Nizar will never do anything so ridiculous as insist that Black and Severus play nice.

“He’s fine, I promise,” Salazar assures him. “If Sirius Black can make jokes about one Dementor being less terrifying than nearly being eaten by fifty of them at once, he’ll survive the experience.”

Nizar exhales slowly and nods. “Excellent. You’re still not telling me something, though.”

“No, I’m not.” Salazar scrubs one hand through his hair, which is far less bedraggled than it was Thursday. “I mentioned to the others that two members of the Underground were at Barnard Park for the attack; one by chance, one when he responded to the other’s request for help. Neither was using an illusion, a cloak, or Polyjuice, and it was the second man who saved Black’s life. Not only did a Death Eater escape who could tell tales, everyone present recognized Black’s savior. He is still in Sirius Black’s company, as we’re all trying to decide how to handle the situation.”

“And you don’t want the Order to know—or at least, you don’t want Dumbledore to know.” Nizar grips his brother’s arms. “Salazar, do tell me why it’s a ‘situation’ before I hex you blind for the next six hours.”

“Nice to know they still communicate so efficiently,” Eithnemael says dryly.

Salazar glares at Eithnemael. “It isn’t that simple, not when I’m discussing my brother’s bloody uncle!”

Minerva lets out a soft gasp. Severus simply freezes in place. He knew that Salazar was keeping close watch over the supposed dead from both sides of the war, but he truly never expected—

“Regulus Black is alive?” Before Salazar can answer the question, Nizar has wrapped him a
crushing hug. “Thank you. Thank you for saving that foolish, arrogant, Pure-blooded little shit.”

“It was an accident on Regulus’s part that made it possible, else I don’t know what would have become of him,” Salazar replies.

Nizar doesn’t look surprised by that. “Are we going to London, then?”

Salazar nods. “We are. I didn’t warn them that I would be in company, but it’s their own fault for being noticed. Kingsley is aware of the situation, but has been kind enough to swear his attending Aurors to secrecy. They will speak of the matter to no one else.”

“Excellent.” Nizar turns to Eithnemael. “There is a place for a guest in my quarters, if you’d like to stay here, but Sirius Black will not object to your presence, especially given that you married the man who acknowledges Sirius as his grandfather.”

Eithnemael looks surprised; Severus suspects she doesn’t feel that way often. “He still claims you, despite the magical adoption?”

“He’s a Black. They’re stubborn.” Nizar rubs at his eyes and sighs. “Elfric was an absolute bastard yesterday and has forced my hand on a matter I didn’t want to deal with, but he was right to do so. It says a lot that we weren’t immediately interrogated by Madam Tyler, Bill, Fleur, and Tonks, but I suspect that will change as everyone’s health improves.”

Severus takes a moment to seethe at his own incompetence. He heard the portrait call Nizar father and refer to Sirius as grandfather and was so bloody incapacitated that it didn’t occur to him why that might be a difficulty at all.

“Salazar, Severus: the two of you need to go bleed out on the ground—no.” Nizar tilts his head to the side, as if listening. “Severus, you need to find a part of the dungeons that feels most comfortable to you, and bleed on that stone. Salazar, you need to go bleed on the bloody Founding Stone.”

Salazar blanches. “I’d rather stick my arm in an active forge.”

“I said bleed on it, not cuddle with it,” Nizar responds dryly.

“It’s the Founding Stone,” Salazar retorts, as if it’s the only argument worth stating. “Lioness, I’ll need you with me, if you’ve no objections. I don’t want to end up stuck to the blasted thing—or exceptionally high. That would not be a useful state of mind right now.”

“I’ve been wondering what the Founding Stone is like,” Minerva says, looking excited.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Nizar tells her. “It looks exactly like a rock.”

“It just doesn’t know how to behave as one, not after Myrddin was done with it,” Salazar adds, still grimacing at the idea of interacting with the Stone.

Severus isn’t concerned about leaving blood in Hogwarts’ dungeon. It isn’t as if it would be the first time he’s bled on the castle floors, but a deliberate offering might bring forth a reaction he doesn’t expect. “I would prefer to have you with me as well, Nizar.”

“Then you’ll have my company.” Nizar raises one eyebrow as he watches Salazar offer his right hand, lifting Minerva to her feet by her left hand. “That would be a ring.”

“How observant of you,” Minerva teases.
“A gold ring with the colors of two different Houses upon it.” Nizar smiles. “Would this be a wedding of paperwork, or ceremony and paperwork?”

“The two of you have very odd ideas of what a wedding should consist of,” Minerva mutters, but then smiles. “Paperwork. I have a feeling you’ll be there to witness it.”

“I’d better be there,” Nizar warns Salazar, who does an abominable job of appearing innocent in response. “Eithnemael, feel free to explore the castle while this bit of blood-letting is done. If you choose to stay, Apparate directly into my classroom and make your way forward from there; my quarters should still recognize you. If you decide to join us, we’ll be meeting at the Entrance Hall doors in an hour. If anyone asks about your presence in the meantime, tell them that you’re my guest.”

Eithnemael retrieves her staff and pets it as if it’s a cat. “Am I allowed to terrify anyone?”

“Not the students. Have fun making the staff wet their trousers, though,” Nizar replies. Eithnemael grins in a way that makes her Veela heritage disconcertingly obvious. “Don’t kill anyone unless they really deserve it.”

The old woman pauses. “Helga would argue that there is already one in this castle who deserves my version of mercy.”

Nizar lifts his head and stares at the ceiling in resignation. “Just…don’t. That is a complicated situation we can discuss at a later time. Besides, Helga claimed that death first. Since she isn’t here, Salazar is next in line.” Salazar merely raises his eyebrows in response, neither confirming nor denying that claim.

Only after Nizar and Severus are in the dungeons, with the Slytherin Common Room two passages behind them, does Severus reach out and grip Nizar’s hand. “If our positions were reversed. If Regulus was the one who was here, and I’d been the one to be part of Salazar’s Underground as a spy. Would your reaction have been the same at learning of my survival?”

Nizar gives him a long, searching look, and then squeezes Severus’s hand. “I hugged Salazar regarding Regulus. If Salazar told me that he’d kept you alive when I’d thought you dead for fifteen years? I’d kiss my brother’s boots, Severus.”

Severus nearly pulls away in alarm. “That sounds far too extreme.”

“Severus.” Nizar sighs. “Regulus spoke to me, and respected me, as some of the others did, but you were my friend. One of the best of all those I can remember. Yes, it would have meant that much more to me.”

His chest hurts. It feels like he can’t breathe, even though he is continuing to do so without difficulty. He wants to say those three fucking words, and he can’t. Much like Nizar’s panic attacks when it comes to self-serving requests, he can’t do it.

No, that’s wrong. Severus clenches his jaw, thinking himself an oblivious fool. There has always been a way to do so.

“Nizar.” Severus pulls on Nizar’s hand until they’re standing in the empty corridor, facing each other.

Nizar looks up at him in concern. “What is it?”

Severus points to his eyes, and then eases his Occlumency shielding so that what he wishes to say is
easily read. It’s not only mere words he is thinking on, but feelings and intent.

Nizar’s eyes widen in shock as he realizes what he’s seeing, and Severus wonders if he’s blundered yet again. Then Nizar seizes him by the hair and yanks him down into a fierce, messy kiss that is as much teeth and hints of blood as it is lips and tongue. “I love you, too, and I would be dragging you to your quarters to fuck you senseless right now if I were capable of it!”

Severus gasps for air. At least now he has a reason for feeling like he can’t breathe. “The dragging or the fucking?”

“Good gods, either of them,” Nizar admits, laughing. “I still feel awful, Severus. I’ll attempt both as soon as I think it won’t end in disaster.”

“I look forward to it,” Severus says after they continue onward. If he is going to bleed on any stone in the dungeons, he is choosing his own quarters. It might not be the heart of Hogwarts’ underground, but those rooms have been home for a very long time.

“Remind me to fetch the Pensife and show you my grand moment of punching Myrddin. I’ve owed you that memory for quite a while now.”

Severus smiles. “A date, then.”

“We have odd dates,” Nizar replies.

“Perhaps, but I’m not about to fuck with established tradition.”
It has been many centuries since she has walked through these halls. She used to come to Hogewáþ often, in the old days, even after her husband’s death. After rules were changed in the thirteenth century, she was no longer welcome.

No student with Veela blood would be welcome in Hogewáþ today, but there is nothing in those changed rules that states a Veela cannot be present as a guest.

That is exactly what Eithnemael tells Argus Filch, who looks amusingly thwarted. “That’s true enough, aye,” he finally admits. “And you’re a guest of someone what’s helping me, even after I was terrible to him, but I still have to do my job, ma’am. The house-elves might keep out the riff-raff, but I’m still on for finding out what folks are doing in these halls.”

“Oh, that is quite easy to answer. I’m saying hello to old friends.”

Filch frowns. “Old friends?”

Eithnemael gestures at the portraits lining the wall behind them. “Some of these portraits are very old. I knew their living counterparts.”

“But—they’re from the twelfth century!” Filch squints at her. “Am I suddenly putting up with another ancient Slytherin?”

Eithnemael smiles in response. “Don’t be silly. I am only of their House by marriage, and I never schooled in Hogewáþ. I served my apprenticeships elsewhere.” She hesitates. “I taught here, long ago. I do believe Nizar is plotting for me to do so again, but I still have doubts that it is right to do so.”

Filch leans back, his weathered face gaining more wrinkles as it puckers in thought. “We could always use a bit more help, what with this lot of hooligans running about in the school,” he says. “I don’t suppose you’ve got one of those magical music masteries, do you?”

Eithnemael shakes her head. “No, but…” She regards him for a moment. “You will have the teacher you need, never fear.”

“You don’t think I should have naught to do with magic?” Filch asks in surprise.
“There is no such thing as a Squib,” Eithnemael says flatly. “There is merely differing levels of magical ability. Even those judged as entirely non-magical can sense strong magic; their difficulty is that they don’t have the means to understand what it is they feel. You can see this castle, Argus Filch, and that means you have potential. Waving a wand does not make one a magician. Honing what talents you have makes you a magician.”

Filch shuffles in place for a few minutes, thinking. Eithnemael waits for him to decide upon his words while eying the portraits. Too many of those who taught here, even briefly, are sleeping, but it is a restless sleep, as if they will soon wake. This school stood with her magical corners unprotected for too long, but Eithnemael can feel strength returning to this little spot of land. It’s part of what finally drove her from her home near Edinburgh to seek out Hogewáþ in the north. Instead of first visiting the castle, she felt herself drawn to the Heights of Brae…where she found her husband’s father sleeping under meager shelter, trying to regain his sense of the earth.

There is danger coming, and it will arrive before Britain’s war mages are truly recovered from Riddle’s vile plot. She is not concerned with telling them so; they are already aware.

The school’s named caretaker interrupts her thoughts. “I think you should be teachin’ here. That was kindly spoken fact, and we need a bit more of that sort of thing. Maybe if more folk heard what you had to say, people like me wouldn’t be so…”

Eithnemael nods. “It would not be easy to sway the stubborn, but I have never hesitated when it comes to speaking the truth.” Something is nudging at her, instincts that are more Veela than human. “It isn’t merely sound that you have a talent for. You have another skill, but I can’t determine what it is. I can only see that it involves color.”

“Oh, that.” Filch draws himself up with pride. “I help restore the portraits when they’re needing work.”

“You can repair magical canvas?” Eithnemael asks, feeling her eyes widen. One normally needs a stronger magical core for that sort of thing.

“No, not that part. Come with me, ma’am,” Filch invites. Eithnemael, curious, accepts the invitation.

They pass by a number of children, and many students who are on the verge of adulthood. Most of them seem to be wondering about Eithnemael’s presence, but they are steering clear of Argus Filch. That is definitely useful. She is not yet ready to be plagued with questions by the young ones.

“Here we are,” Filch says when they arrive on the seventh floor of one of the towers. Before them is a portrait of dear Fellona, who recognizes her at once.

“Bless my stars!” Fellona exclaims, bright-eyed and happy. “Eithnemael! How good it is to see you!”

“And you, my friend,” Eithnemael replies, smiling. “They moved your portrait.”

“Oh, they made me a guardian of the Gryffindor Common Room some centuries back,” Fellona says. “Are you returning to us, dearest?”

“It seems so,” Eithnemael allows. “Though I didn’t know your painting was here. Mister Filch wished for me to see it, I am presuming?”

“Aye,” Filch responds. “Nearly three years ago, the new-named Lord Sirius was… a bit out of sorts. He was always a ruffian, but he’d never have done to this portrait what he did that year if he’d been in his right mind.”
“Took a knife to me!” Fellona interjects, indignant and angry. “I had to flee for my very painted life when he fell into a rage after I refused him entry into the tower!”

“Colors.” Eithnemael glances at Filch. “Painting?”

Filch looks grimly pleased, but he seems to be grim about most things. “I can’t put the magic back into a canvas, but Madam Willowood—she’s the art teacher here—she says I’ve got the best eye for color she’s ever seen. The Fa—er, Fellona’s canvas was knifed through in several places. Whenever a bit of nonsense like that happens, I line everything back up proper, repair the tears, and paint in whatever was lost. Once I’m done, Madam Willowood can hurry up with drying it all and then fix the magic if it’s not doing as it should. Fellona isn’t the first canvas I’ve restored in this castle, and likely won’t be the last.”

“Argus Filch, that is a very impressive talent. It requires a great deal of skill and patience, and it is certainly one you should be lauded for,” Eithnemael says. “And don’t give me that silly brush-off, either. I warned you that I am an honest woman. You are wasted as a caretaker. You should be working in a museum, doing what you enjoy.”

“And what museum is going to hire me?” Filch asks in a bitter voice. “Got no museums in Wizarding Britain, Lady Eithnemael, and I’ve got no way to prove to a museum on the other side that I’ve any talent at all!”

“I do believe Britain does not have a monopoly on museums, magical or otherwise,” Eithnemael says dryly.

“And—Mister Filch, dear, do recall that Madam Willowood is to be opening a museum within the next year!” Fellona says cheerfully. “If you remind her of your skill, she’d be certain to hire you on for it!”

“Well…well. I’d have to go an’ think about that,” Filch mutters. He wanders off as if in a daze, followed by a rather scruffy-looking cat who isn’t a cat at all. How fascinating.

“I do hate it when talent is overlooked,” Eithnemael comments.

“I recall.” Fellona gives her a cheeky smile. “You should be off to the other tower. Young Lord Brice’s portrait will be glad to see you again.”

Eithnemael inclines her head. “Thank you, Fellona. I will do so.”

She has her own portrait of Brice, painted on his twenty-first birthday on her request. He updated it the day before his death. That canvas has long been a comfort to her. Brice’s portrait fills the silence when she feels his loss too keenly, and makes her laugh as he chases away that looming darkness. It is a pittance compared to having her husband in her arms, but she knew when they married that she would outlive him. None foresaw his early death; his portrait, his voice, kept her from succumbing to madness.

The classroom door is not readily visible in the hallway, which has now been graced by an odd tapestry of British cave trolls…who appear to be dancing. She suspects it must have a Permanent Sticking Charm attached, because even Nizar’s sense of humor would find that tapestry to be lacking.

When she turns away from her annoyed perusal of the tapestry, the door is where it should be. “Oh, you’ve learned to hide. I’m certain that the students appreciate that,” Eithnemael murmurs, pushing open the door.
The Defence classroom is exactly as she remembers it but for the addition of modern student seating and a teacher’s desk. Nizar had never really bothered with sitting during his classes; she wonders how often he actually uses the chair paired with the desk.

The cast-iron S on the door takes her a moment. She knows what is required, but doesn’t recall which direction would gain her the Deslizarse living quarters. She lets out a brief sigh and simply opens the door, glad to find the bright light of the sitting room.

The first thing she notes is that Nizar returned the room to its original size, which is pleasing. She’d hated the reduction in size, seeing it as evidence of someone expressing grief in one of the few ways they could that would not cause the old Magician’s Council to get further involved in one’s affairs. Then she turns to find the children’s portraits in their proper places on the walls.

All of them are waiting for her with similar expressions of delight: shy, talented Elfric; clever, quick-witted Galiena; and Brice—fierce, protective, fiery Brice. “Hello.”

“Hello, love,” Brice says. Those two words remind her so much of the moment they first met that it nearly brings Eithnemael to tears. “You’ve been gone for a very long time.”

“Yes, well…I wasn’t exactly welcome. Besides, you knew I would return,” Eithnemael says.

“We did.” Galiena smiles. “But still, it’s been quite a while. I’m glad to see you again.”

“And I’m glad to see you well,” Elfric adds, but in the old tongue, not the current English of Britain. “Sorry, I seem to be set on not learning this infernal language.”

“That’s all right. I’ve not forgotten it.” Eithnemael eyes the furniture before deciding to sit on the sofa opposite the paintings. “I’ve been invited to stay, though I will be insisting on proper living quarters soon enough. In the meantime, you’ll have more of my company than you can bear.”

“We’re portraits.” Galiena grins. “There isn’t much of a limit to what we can bear.”

“Fire,” Elfric says.

“That isn’t the same thing!”

“I married you. I’d put up with you until the end of time, just as I promised,” Brice’s portrait says. “How is the older portrait doing? None of us have seen him about the castle in a very long time.”

“The elder portrait of yourself is doing well, but he has been unable to access the twin frame for his painting within Hogewáp since the mid-1200s or so. It could be earlier; I am long-lived, but that lifespan is not accompanied by perfect recollection.”

Elfric sighs. “The Gaunt. I’ll wager you all the shillings I have that it’s the Gaunt.”

“It’s a good thing I don’t gamble, but that isn’t even a bet worth taking,” Brice replies. “The frame might be in the Rubbish Room aspect that The Gaunt created when he couldn’t gain access to Father’s quarters, or it might have been destroyed. He wasn’t exactly consistent in his actions.”

“The Gaunt,” Eithnemael repeats, frowning. “I know the name. He was a teacher for a time, but I had no dealings with him. Who was he?”

Galiena jumps from her portrait frame into Elfric’s so she can wrap her arm around his shoulders. “It isn’t your fault.”
“No, Galiena,” Elfric refutes, shaking his head. “We know that it wasn’t a deliberate choice. It still could have been foolish circumstances.”

“Rubbish,” Brice declares. “You were and are exceptionally cautious in your actions. I still suspect there was a crafted trap meant especially for you.”

“Oh, dear.” Eithnemael listens as the portraits tell them how The Gaunt came to be, and their full suspicions—as well as confirmed facts—as to what The Gaunt did to the school, and to their father. “That does explain a great deal.” She suspects there is more, but if Nizar has not spoken of it to the portraits, then he has reasons for doing so. She will ask her questions in a place where portraits do not dwell.

“Oh—Father!” Galiena suddenly exclaims.

Eithnemael is not fond of the fact that a bit of her hearing was lost to the advancing centuries. She turns her head to find one of the doors in the hallway standing open, with Nizar next to it. “You always did like to cheat with doorways.”

“It’s not cheating. It’s efficient,” Nizar counters, shutting the door. “I was just hopping up here to grab the Pensife. I wasn’t expecting to find you in my quarters already.”

“I wanted to see the portraits again…and perhaps I am not yet ready to terrorize others,” Eithnemael admits. “Seeing more of this castle reminded me of how long it has been. Tomorrow is soon enough to cackle like a crone at fools.”

“Believe me, I understand exactly what you mean.” Nizar ducks into the room that houses his brewing area and supplies, coming back out with Galiena’s bronze and blue Pensieve tucked under his arm. “It’s Galiena’s fault I have it again; she left it for me,” he explains when Eithnemael raises an eyebrow. “I’d have preferred she returned mine and kept the gift, but I suppose she wanted something of mine to keep, instead.”

“It is very much something I would do,” Galiena’s portrait says.

“Where are you off to with a Pensieve? Is it for this visit to London?” Eithnemael asks.

“No, it won’t go to London. Not today, at least. I promised Severus that I’d show him the memory of myself punching Myrddin, and it’s something I’ve put off for too long.”

Eithnemael grins. “I’d forgotten that. What a pleasant thing to recall.”

“I thought so, too,” Nizar agrees, smiling. “Will you be coming with us this afternoon?”

“No. I do wish to meet the man who claims you as a son, but…” Eithnemael looks to the paintings again. “Not today. There will be time enough for such things later.”

* * *

Severus emerges from his bathroom to find that Nizar has returned to his sitting room. Nizar is standing over the bronze-and-blue accented Pensieve, extracting a memory from his temple with his wand. His face is taut with concentration in a way that he normally doesn’t seem to need.
He waits until the memory has settled with its swift stillness into the Pensieve. “Were you having difficulties?” Severus asks.

Nizar nods. “Grabbing that memory of Galfridus from 991 was easier, but I’m not certain why. This was…I think there is a bit more of what came before the actual punching than I’d planned, but I couldn’t sort it out any better than that. Might be the same for after, as well, but even with the additions, the memory is perhaps ten minutes of time, at most.”

“You’re serious about showing this memory to me now.” Severus wants to be certain. He didn’t mean for the repetition of the request to seem like a demand.

“We still have forty minutes before we need to meet the others. Eithnemael won’t be joining us; she found Hogewāþ a bit more distressful than she realized. Granted, that won’t save anyone tomorrow.” Nizar tucks his wand back into his sleeve and looks at Severus. “You’re still all right?”

Severus tries not to roll his eyes. “It worries me that you expect there might not have been improvement.”

“I prefer to be cautious. I expected improvement, but…” Nizar shrugs. “Things have been rather fucked up of late.”

Severus can’t argue with that. “I’m fine, Nizar. It still isn’t a perfect recovery, but…” He glances off to one side, listening to what the earth tells him by focusing his attention inwards. “Twit Riddle must have been concerned that the war mages were gaining traction in regards to Wizarding Britain’s belief in our abilities. I’m almost certain that is a bit of Diagon Alley that I’m perceiving.”

“I’m sensing that, too, but I wasn’t getting a whit of it on Tuesday afternoon,” Nizar says. “I think that complete fucking imbecile created a self-fulfilling prophecy by stirring up sympathy, and sympathy is a strong emotion that is most often tangled up with belief. It’s hard to have feelings for people you don’t have faith in.”

“You mean he wanted to be certain we would remain unaware of Wizarding Britain…and created the opposite problem,” Severus realizes.

“He isn’t entirely stupid. He might have recognized that possibility, which means he will most likely be acting on his plans very soon. Thus…” Nizar waves his hand at the waiting Pensieve. “Before we have no time for it at all, or we’re so bogged down in plotting that it falls by the wayside. I promised you would see it.”

Severus steps forward and halts awkwardly in place. “You’re not going with me?”

“I will if you want me to.” Nizar looks down at the Pensieve. “While I don’t mind the lovely view of punching Myrddin, it’s what comes before, or after, that I might not want to experience right now.”

“Did Eithnemael’s appearance rattle you that badly?”

“A bit,” Nizar admits quietly. “I’m glad to see her again, but she’s been alone since November of 1012, Severus. I know exactly what that is like.” He steps back from the Pensieve. “All yours.”

“When exactly is this?” Severus asks before he dares the Pensieve’s contents.

“Almost a year exactly after the memory I showed you of Galfridus. Augustus of 992.” Nizar hesitates. “My apprenticeship with Godric was already concluded, but I don’t recall the circumstances.”
The Pensieve acts the same as it did in February, granting Severus the same treatment that Gedeloc’s ancient Pensieve had done before Severus shattered it in a fit of justifiable temper. There is no rough, buffeting tumble, but a smooth drop and gentle landing. It leaves Severus convinced that he never wants to experience Dumbledore’s disastrous Pensieve ever again.

Severus glances around to find that he is within a corridor in Hogwarts, though he isn’t certain where until he starts examining doors. This is the third storey, most likely, and he already hears a familiar voice.

“Look, I know it’s not the most appetizing thing in the world, but you really do need to eat it.” That is Nizar; he sounds exactly like the 992 portrait rather than his older, slightly deeper intonations. His words are followed by loud hissing that echoes along the passage. “Yes, I know you prefer your father to feed you, but he still has classes to teach!”

Nizar rounds the corner, conversing not with Fortunata, as Severus half expected, but the infant he’s carrying in his arms. This would be Zuri Zumar Deslizarse, then, not yet one year old. Severus doesn’t have much experience with babies, but suspects Zuri is smaller than he should be for his age.

The baby is strong enough to be sitting up on his own; the baby’s left arm rests atop Nizar’s shoulder while the baby’s right hand grips Nizar’s robe. As they come closer, Severus can see that Zuri’s hair is black, his skin a pale bronze, and his eyes are somewhere between infant blue and emerging green. After that, the similarities between father and son fail, as the infant’s features remind Severus far more of the portrait of Orellana.

He didn’t know that babies in this era, regardless of gender, were placed into long gowns that resemble fancy sacks more than they do clothing. Those sacks are probably far superior for cleaning a child than trying to remove trousers from an angry, uncooperative infant. That was Severus’s only childhood experience with changing a nappy, and he refused to repeat it.

The baby hisses again, reminding Severus of another important distinction: he had no idea that babies spoke Parseltongue before any human languages.

“Yes, he is done for the day. Hence why we’re going to the classroom, you cheeky brat.” Nizar is wearing deep, dark green, but the robes aren’t the same style from the painting. Fashion didn’t change much in that era, but there are subtle differences in length and design. His skin is already darker than what was painted into the 992 portrait, making Severus wonder if he spent recent time in Castile.

He has to admit, if someone had placed Nizar at this age next to Harry Potter at age fourteen and asked if they were the same person, he would have suspected Nizar to be a blood relative, not Potter himself. It’s not just Nizar’s appearance, but the way he carries himself, lines of confidence that were absent in the child. His gaze was always intense, but there is joy, grief, and bitterness characterizing it now, an adult’s keen awareness of the trials that life can bring. There was a hint of it after the Triwizard Tournament, but nothing like this.

Nizar is also not doing his best to crush or hide his intelligence, as the child’s habit had been. That changes the set of his features, and adds fire to his eyes.

Nizar and his hissing bundle stop at a certain door, which Nizar knocks upon before pushing open. “I’ve something for you, brother!”

Severus follows Nizar into the classroom, which is a great deal different than what Severus is used to. That the room is used for brewing is obvious by the drying racks filled with gathered herbs, the potted plants lining the windows, and the neatly stacked cauldrons. The tables aren’t work benches,
but much older trestle tables with no chairs—though the potions stains are familiar enough. If Salazar gives lectures aside from his brewing instructions, Severus suspects that happens elsewhere.

Even in a Pensieve memory, the room smells strongly of the pungent green of herbs, earth, iron, and extinguished flame. Beneath that is something that must be Nizar’s perception alone, it’s so faint—a hint of salty ocean wind, accompanied by the lavender that follows the Slytherin brothers everywhere.

Salazar himself is alone in the room, and he has changed greatly from Severus’s view of him in the memory of Galfridus. His way of dressing is largely unchanged, but there is less care taken…or perhaps he has lost weight that makes his clothing appear wrinkled and loose instead of properly fitted. Salazar is bearded and weary, heartbreak and grief worn like a brand across his face.

*Orellana,* Severus thinks, and tries not to cringe. He doesn’t ever want to experience that sort of loss, but he’s set himself up for it anyway by falling in love with a Slytherin lunatic.

“It’s a good thing I’ve already sent the students on, then.” Salazar reaches out and accepts the infant from Nizar. Baby Zuri immediately settles in with contented hissing intermixed with an infant’s babble, pleased with his place in the world. “Not wanting to eat again, is he?”

“You know he likes you best,” Nizar says dryly, smiling. “We tried the old standby of goat’s milk, but he was more interested in gnawing on the teat than drinking from it. Then it was onto softened bread, but I might as well have offered him a rock, he was so impressed. I even tried goat meat, just in case Zuri wanted vengeance for all the indignities of the goat’s milk, but he flung it at Godric.”

Salazar’s smile is slow to bloom. It’s obvious that he adores his child, but that feeling doesn’t outshine his weariness. By the time of his 995 portrait, he’ll be more vibrant, more vital, but not yet. All of it makes Severus feel like he’s intruding onto a memory that should have remained private.

“I’m certain Godric appreciated being assisted with dinner,” Salazar says, tweaking Zuri’s nose. The baby scowls and hisses an obvious demand for that act not to be repeated, which only makes his father’s smile widen. “It was worth the experiment, I suppose. Next time we’ll know to simply wait until I’m ready for my own dinner. He’ll grow beyond the dependency soon enough.”

Severus is exceptionally uncomfortable now. Zuri might grow to be a capable magician, but right now, he is a child who knows only one parent. Given the fact that Severus knows Nizar already had his own responsibilities, he suspects that Zuri is only placated by his father, Fortunata, or Nizar.

Nizar opens his mouth to respond and then pauses, cocking his head. “Do you hear that?”

Severus is now able to hear the echo of a man yelling, though most of it is channeled down the corridor, not coming in through the open classroom door. It sounds a great deal like Argus Filch in a full temper, threatening to flay students alive for mucking up the castle.

“Whoever they are, they’re beyond rude,” Nizar mutters, and stalks out of the classroom. Severus follows, understanding at once why he’s begun to hurry. Beneath the angry yelling is the sound of a child’s distressed sobbing.

Severus’s first sight of Myrddin Wyllt is utter proof that Nizar and Salazar haven’t been exaggerating the man’s faults in the slightest. The wizened old magician is slightly taller than Nizar, with dark
brown eyes and pale skin that resembles thin, incredibly wrinkled parchment. He has badly cropped grey hair, a disastrous beard, and full-length grey robes that should have been sent to the rubbish pile a decade previous. Myrddin is pointing his gnarled finger at a much smaller version of Galiena, who is shrinking back from him in terror.

Severus finds himself enraged on her behalf. He has yelled at students, yes, but at least they were Hogwarts age students, not children who still attended primary school!

The motion happens so fast, Severus nearly misses it. Nizar is suddenly a presence standing between Galiena and Myrddin, sheltering her from a foul-tempered pile of rags. In the same moment, his fist connects with Myrddin’s grizzled jaw. Severus can’t help a pleased smile when he hears the distinct crack of breaking bone. It wasn’t Nizar’s hand that gave way.

What Nizar hasn’t spoken of is what comes next. Nizar pins Myrddin to the nearest wall, his original holly wand digging into the old magician’s throat. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” Nizar shouts.

Severus glances over to see sudden bafflement on Galiena’s face. That wasn’t in Old English; that was spoken in modern English.

Myrddin doesn’t seem upset about being pinned and threatened, just annoyed. “She didn’t know the formula for one of the most important potions in existence!”

“SHE IS EIGHT!” Nizar roars in response. He doesn’t seem to have noticed that Myrddin has no trouble understanding modern English—which is entirely fucking odd. “What potion is so fucking important that you see it fitting to go hauling off at a child?”

“Your way of speaking is strange,” Myrddin comments, looking as if he’s on the verge of a snit. “Potissima Sanguine Purificationis! It is so important that all should know it!”

“Potissima—” Nizar squeezes his eyes shut in brief vexation. “That—you—that’s an apprentice-level potion, you utter fucking nutjob!”

“And a life-saving one, at that!” Myrddin retorts.

Severus takes a moment to reflect that while Myrddin might have been one of the most powerful Elemental Magicians to ever exist, he also had the common sense of a rotting tree stump.

Nizar growls and shoves his wand roughly along Myrddin’s neck until it’s embedded under his jaw, leaving a visible red welt on Myrddin’s skin. “Nearly one month ago, someone thought to take advantage of our absence from this castle,” he says. There must have been another language switch; instead of appearing baffled, now Galiena looks miffed at being excluded. “He killed one of our students, and nearly killed my niece. As far as I am concerned, the most important of potions and herbs in existence is the Dragon’s Breath of Life, for without it, she would be dead. Fortunata was still ill enough afterward that the potion made from its seed was still needed to see her thrive again.”

Nizar leans in closer to Myrddin, his eyes bright with green fire and silver sparks. “If you’d been stupid enough to hold a wand in your hand when I found you accosting my daughter, you’d be in smaller pieces than Constantinius,” he hisses.

Severus feels ill. It wasn’t just Orellana’s death that left Salazar in such a state. He never realized that Salazar nearly lost his daughter within the same year.

Nizar abruptly releases Myrddin and steps back. “Get the fuck out of my sight before I’m tempted to do the same to you, anyway. I am not currently fond of fools.”
Myrddin draws himself up and straightens his robes. The gesture is arrogant, for all it does nothing to improve the state of the old magician’s clothing. Then he ruins the attempt at haughtiness by bending over to spit onto the floor. There is a clatter of something solid striking stone. “How displeasing. I liked those teeth.”

“Leave,” Nizar insists, scowling. “Your teeth won’t miss you!”

Myrddin snorts. “Very well. We will meet and talk later this evening.”

“The hell we will,” Nizar mutters, glaring at Myrddin until the man finally sees a modicum of sense and Disapparates. “Prick. Who the fuck visits a castle full of magicians just to scream at—” Nizar breaks off, blinks a few times, and slaps his hand over his face. “That was Myrddin Wyllt, wasn’t it?”

Severus follows Galiena’s curious gaze to find that Salazar joined them, the baby slung over his shoulder. Zuri is preoccupied with hissing at a tapestry on the wall. “It was indeed, but please, never apologize for that,” Salazar says, grinning. The expression brings a great deal of animation back to his features. “That was one of the most beautiful things I’ve yet seen, and I would hate for you to regret it.”

“Good, because I don’t. What a complete sarding sack of shit!” Nizar exclaims. “Why do people think so highly of him?”

“Because Myrddin Wyllt makes up for his abominable behavior by being one of the most powerful Elemental Magicians on the planet, not to mention one of the most long-lived,” Salazar replies. “Granted, I think too many of us have fallen into the habit of allowing his abilities to excuse his behavior. You may well be the first man to tell him off aside from myself, and even I was never so fierce about it.”

“You mean you never threatened to turn him into pieces,” Nizar says.

“No, I merely threatened to drown him in the Black Loch. Alas, the old goat can literally walk upon water.”

Galiena gives Salazar an odd look, purses her lips, and then goes to Nizar, tugging on his robe sleeve. “Did you mean it?”

Nizar looks down in surprise. “Mean what? Which part? I’m certain I meant all of it, even if Briton wouldn’t have thanked me for turning her war mage into pieces.”

Galiena ducks her head. “Daughter,” she whispers. “You called me that.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Nizar raises both eyebrows. “Er…is that a problem?”

Galiena shakes her head and then plasters herself against Nizar’s waist to hug him. “No, Father. It’s okay.”

The intense discomfort is back. Severus again feels like an intruder, but the memory hasn’t ended yet.

Nizar picks up Galiena and carries her in his arms. “Let’s go back to our quarters. You can draw me lovely pictures of Myrddin Wyllt as a goat.”

Even though she’s buried her face in Nizar’s shoulder, Galiena’s voice is still prim. “Godric says that is an insult to goats.”
“I’m sure the goats don’t mind,” Salazar says in amusement. “I’ll be off to tell the others that the goat has returned.” He waits until Nizar has stepped away, Galiena in his arms, before murmuring, “Finally,” under his breath.

“Shut up, Sal!” Nizar retorts without turning.

Ah. They are referring to Galiena’s adoption, not to any long absence of Myrddin’s.

“Not ever.” Salazar glances down at Zuri, who has stopped hissing at the tapestry to stare at his father. “Shall we both be off to tell the others that Myrddin is lurking about the castle?”

Zuri frowns. “Goat,” he says clearly.

Salazar raises one eyebrow. “You do realize that it’s far more customary for one’s first human word to be, oh, Father, perhaps?”

Zuri scowls. “Goat,” he insists—

Then the memory has abruptly ejected Severus from the Pensieve. It’s such a sudden act that Severus stumbles back and nearly falls onto his own sofa before Nizar’s hand steadies him. “Wow, was it that terrible?” Nizar asks.

Severus shakes his head. “The memory drops too abruptly. The Pensieve didn’t know how to handle it. The rest of it was…” He thinks on it and realizes he has no wish to discuss that much death. “Your dispatch of Myrddin was entertaining, as promised.”

“Then I apologize for the swift departure. I can recall everything up until that last moment with Galiena, but the rest is missing until it picks up again that evening,” Nizar says. “I thought I’d put in enough of a buffer, but I suppose not.”

“It’s fine.” Severus does the only thing he can think of to avoid discussing any other aspect of that memory. He hugs Nizar, who seems startled by the sudden embrace before he relaxes into it.

That, of course, brings its own realization with it. “You smell entirely too much of the hospital wing and a damp hillside.”

“Then I’m glad there is still time to shower before departing.” Nizar leans back and smirks up at Severus. “Did I do well enough at adding the shower to your bathroom that there is enough room for two?”

Severus bites back a smile. “I spent forty minutes in that shower this morning.”

Nizar just looks at him. “And…?”

“You do recall that you were complaining of exhaustion not twenty minutes ago, yes?” Severus asks.

“I am never too tired to linger in hot water with a man I happen to love, thank you very much.”

Severus tries not to grimace. “Are you going to be saying that often?”

“I could,” Nizar says. “I could also cease doing so entirely if it bothers you.”

Severus frowns; the utter lack doesn’t sound appealing, either. “Not in public, then. Not right now, at least.”

Nizar smiles. “Then that’s exactly how it will be.” He tugs on Severus’s hand. “Shower?”
Severus huffs out an annoyed sigh that is utterly wasted, given that he’s smiling. “If you insist, but I’m not getting in.”

He realizes ten minutes later that he might as well have shared in this shower, after all. Nizar uses so much hot water to remove the grime accumulated since Tuesday evening that the charms to clear humidity from the room can’t keep up; the bathroom has its own cloud system in no time at all. Severus will need to cast drying charms on his clothes to keep them from mildew and mold.

“I have an odd question.”

“Then I might have an odd answer.” Nizar scrubbed down quickly and is now doing nothing more than standing under the hot water, letting it drench his back with a grimace that speaks of pain from tense muscles. Severus makes a mental note to grab two potions before their departure, and then possibly at least a dozen more to keep for emergencies...like suddenly needing to deal with both Sirius Black and Regulus Black in the same room.

He hasn’t decided how he feels about Regulus’s resurrection yet. He refuses to think on it with any certainty until after he’s seen the man again, and heard why Regulus felt it necessary to fake his death in the first place.

“You said you’d never changed the color of your skin, but we know that Petunia—” Severus all but spits her name, “—had that child working outdoors at all hours to do all her gardening. Surrey does see sunlight.”

“Oh.” Nizar raises his head, blinking water out of his eyes as it runs down his face. “I think I know the reason for that, but not because I remember why it’s that way for me.”

Severus follows the lines of water down the full length of Nizar’s body. “And there is the fact that you have no hint of a tan line at all. Anywhere.”

Bloody hell, he knows he’s still done in when he is staring at a brilliant man’s magnificent arse and his cock isn’t the slightest bit interested.

Nizar glances at him, grinning. “What, have you never had a lie about in the sun while naked?”

Severus tries not to cringe back at the very idea of that sort of public indecency. “No.”

“But in public, and certainly not where anyone could be...” Severus looks up and realizes that Nizar is grinding his teeth. “I’m sorry, I’d forgotten a rather pertinent event from 1976.”

“It’s fine.” It’s really not.

“Horse shit,” Nizar mutters, using his hand to fling his hair back from his face. “Modesty standards in my time were far more restrictive than now. If you had an interest in that sort of sunbathing, you did it far away from everyone—or you did it on a ship at sea where no one could afford to be all that concerned with the sanctity of the clothed body. Same thing, really, though I never felt the need to spend that much time on a boat. You, however, were wondering on how someone could spend a great deal of time in the sun and remain pale, even with a natural genetic inclination towards dark skin.”

That was almost far too much information at once, but it serves as a good distraction from humiliation (and guilt) that Severus is still struggling to forget. “Essentially.”

“We saw examples of what you’re speaking of several times.” Nizar waves his hand to turn off the taps. He continues speaking as he squeezes water from his hair and then accepts a fresh towel from
Severus. “We had several children—and a few adults—who came to us from very poor backgrounds, or backgrounds of servitude that were considered foul and unjust. It’s a matter of—shit, I forgot the word, but it’s related to the diet. If your body is consuming what it needs to be healthy, the sun tends to be kind to your skin, even if one is inclined towards your sort of paleness,” Nizar says. “If you’re being starved, or not being fed what is needed, the sun tends to try to set you afire. The burns heal, but nothing changes, as your body just spent what energy it had on repairing damage.”

“That…makes a great deal of sense.” Severus used to burn as a child if he spent too long unsheltered during the summer. He noticed the trend stopped after he began attending Hogwarts, but assumed it was because he wasn’t spending nearly as much time outdoors. Not only did he live in a dungeon for ten months out of the year, but he and Lily grew older. They spent less time at the playground and far more time indoors, having conversations, watching her parents’ telly, playing games with non-magical playing cards and a non-magical Tarot deck from a ridiculous “New Age” shop in London, and listening to as much music from both sides as they could cram into their skulls.

When the war was done and teaching replaced spying, Severus still came home during the summers. He’d kept up the herb garden he’d planted years before, working in the sun to keep it pristine and healthy. He was preoccupied with his own guilt much of the time, and would only realize in the evenings that he’d neglected any sort of non-magical sunscreen or brewed balm. Severus would sometimes come back indoors flushed from the heat, perhaps with a pink cast to his skin, but never with anything he would call a burn. Every hint of color would be gone by morning.

“You do realize that makes me hate Petunia even more, yes?”

Nizar pauses in the midst of pulling on his trousers. He even banished the cloud of steam at some point, but Severus was immersed in his thoughts and didn’t notice. “Is there anything that would cause you to stop hating Petunia Dursley?” Nizar counters.

Severus scowls. “No.”

“Then I don’t see the difficulty,” Nizar says. Severus jerks his head in a nod, watching as Nizar finishes putting on the clean clothing the elves delivered the moment he set foot in the shower.

“Now: are you ready to greet Regulus Black?”

“I really don’t know,” Severus admits. “I’m still not certain how I feel about his survival beyond relief that there is someone Slytherin and sensible from those years aside from myself.”

Nizar slides his wand back into the sleeve of his violet-embroidered black robe. “Well, if he grew up to be a complete prick, at least Regulus is a complete prick who doesn’t like Twit Riddle.”
Family

Chapter Summary

Tonks is certain now that she missed something yesterday morning, something obvious enough that it was probably slapping her in the face and calling her filthy names. She hates that feeling; she’s going to feel right stupid once she figures it out.

Chapter Notes

Surprise weekend bonus chapter <3

Tonks has only one goal upon reaching home Thursday afternoon: bed. Well, that and thanking Kreacher for bringing her to Northampton, even if he has yet to stop muttering about Half-blood Blacks and disgraces. It’s still better than his previous favorite chants about Mudbloods.

Ted Tonks takes one look at her, disappears into the kitchen, and comes back with a glass of orange juice in his hand. “Drink it.”

“Dad, throwing up orange juice is terrible,” Tonks complains, but she takes an obedient sip. “Wait, it’s from my grandparents grove?”

“It’s that time of year,” Ted replies, grinning. Kreacher mutters something disparaging and uses the given opportunity to Disapparate. She knows he’ll be about, taking his duty quite seriously, even if he’s lurking on the roof like a gargoyle to do it.

“Okay. Awesome.” Tonks keeps drinking. Oranges from Spain mean she’s less likely to reject the juice directly into a toilet. They just taste better when they’re from her grandmother’s grove, which is sitting on family land that’s been owned by her grandmother’s part of the family for generations. “I need to pass out for about a week, but overnight will have to do.”

“We thought as much, sweetheart.” Ted takes back the empty glass and gives her a hug. “We did stop by Hogwarts on Wednesday morning, but you were still asleep. Your mum’s out right now, but I wanted you to know that we’re both so glad that you’re all right.”

“Just risking my neck for Wizarding Britain, as usual,” Tonks replies, trying for a cheeky smile. “If the M.L.E. calls for me, tell them I’m not alive again until tomorrow.”

“Consider it done, baby. Go get some rest.”

Upstairs, Tonks strips down to her bra and knickers and then crawls into her own bed. She hasn’t seen it in weeks, not since she took up guard rotation at Grimmauld Place. Her bed is way better than the lumpy ancient mattress in her borrowed bedroom, one Sirius is supposed to be replacing this week. Remus would like this mattress better, too.

I should’ve gone to Wales, is her last waking, mopey thought. Werewolves make excellent bed-
warmers.

She sleeps straight through the afternoon and night. What wakes her the next morning, sometime after nine o’clock, is a hint of magic in the air that doesn’t belong. Her parents’ house always has something a bit magical happening, but this isn’t them.

Tonks sits up and nearly lets out a shriek before she recognizes that a) that is a basilisk, not that bloody Horcrux snake Riddle had carted about, and b) it’s a Patronus. “Bloody fuck, Nizar, I’m going to skin your arse alive!”

The Patronus, realizing she’s awake, lifts its head and opens its large mouth to deliver a message. “Bleed on the earth in your favorite place. It’ll help.” Then the Patronus gives her a decidedly smug look before crawling away through the wall.

“Bleed on the earth.” Tonks tries to shake awareness back into her muddy brain and regrets it. She spends the next five minutes hanging off the edge of her bed, dizzy and watching the room spin. It’s sort of fun as long as she doesn’t sick up. She did quite a lot of that on Thursday morning, and really, enough with that, please.

Tonks is certain now that she missed something yesterday morning, something obvious enough that it was probably slapping her in the face and calling her filthy names. She hates that feeling; she’s going to feel right stupid once she figures it out.

Bleeding on the earth makes sense, now that she can think a bit more clearly. A war mage is normally tied to the entire kingdom, but even starting out with a little patch of ground should help. Home recognizes Tonks, even if it’s just because of Mum’s wards and Dad’s charms, so giving a bit of blood to the garden outside should do her a world of good.

The idea of feeling better gives her the willpower to dig up clean clothes, swapping out her violet dragonhide coat for her second favorite, the green one with its punk brass accents and pseudo-military trim. The black one is tempting, but she’s in the mood for green. A good hot shower makes her smell a lot less like a permanent resident of Hogwarts’ hospital wing.

She takes a look in the mirror after she’s dressed out of habit. Familiar heart-shaped features stare back at her. Her nose is behaving itself, which is the only thing she ever changed about her face and meant for it to be permanent. Her skin is quite a bit darker than Mum’s, showing off the Spanish ancestry she gets through Dad and his mother. She hasn’t bothered doing anything to her appearance since being knocked on her arse Tuesday evening, which means her eyebrows, eyelashes, and hair are the stark, dark brown she was born with. She got rid of the tiny ringlet curls in her hair at age seven and refused to put them back. Her dark brown hair emphasizes that she very much takes after Gran. It’s the reason why her full name is Nymphadora Aitana Tonks, but she’s not much fond of going by Aitana, either.

I want to introduce Remus to my grandparents, Tonks thinks, and then grins at her reflection. She’s never introduced a boyfriend or girlfriend to them before. Gran won’t have to ask if it’s serious; she’ll know it at once. Even better, her grandparents won’t have a bit of trouble with the werewolf part, though Tonks will likely have to clear up a few fictional inaccuracies.

I wonder if Remus will like Spain. I’ve never asked if he’s been that far south. Her abuela grew up in the family orange groves south of Sierra de Mariola in the Alicante Province, which is beautiful country—nothing like England at all. At age seventeen, Aitana Macia Soler met a visiting black Englishman from the East Midlands named Jack Edward Tonks, eighteen years old and on the British version of a walkabout before going to university. He fell in love with the language first, and then with Aitana, and they were married before they’d known each other a full year. Aitana agreed
to go north to Britain with Jack so he could go to uni in Edinburgh for mathematics.

He finished up nicely, almost valedictorian. Gran and Granddad were gearing up to move back to southern Spain when Gran turned up pregnant. They stayed in London for the birth, resolved to remain just long enough for baby Edward to grow a bit so he would have an easier time of traveling…and then Edward Diego Tonks performed his first bit of accidental magic by Banishing his crib when he decided he didn’t like it anymore.

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Granddad panicked; Gran remembered something vague in the family history about how they might’ve had a passel of witches once—the good sort, not the burn-at-the-stake sort—and maybe they should just wait and see how things went.

They met their first wizards by taking Baby Edward out into London for a constitutional, whereupon Edward decided he didn’t like the color of the local Debenhams and turned it purple. The wizards fixed Debenhams (Dad cried when they changed back), and sat the Tonks family down to teach them some important new details about their baby. A few history lessons later, along with an explanation of what their baby would need for schooling, saw her grandparents realizing that at age eleven, Edward would go to Hogwarts in Scotland. There was no school for magic in Spain, no one wanted to go to Durmstrang when Eastern Europe was still a complete mess because of World War II, and Gran firmly decided that no child of hers was going to attend Beauxbatons for reasons known only to Gran.

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Gran and Granddad remained in England, moving back near Granddad’s parents in the south of Northampton. They became familiar with Diagon Alley, sent Dad to the local primary school with rules about no magic outside the house firmly lodged in Ted Tonks’s head. The family spent summers with Gran’s parents, where their son learned proper Castellano and wandered the orange groves of Alicante.

When her dad turned eleven, they didn’t wait for a Hogwarts letter—they sent the confirmation of Edward Tonks’s attendance to Hogwarts before the end of that same day. Fortunately, Hogwarts was used to that sort of thing, and sent back a prompt acceptance letter, along with a very kind, welcoming postscript from Headmaster Armando Dippet. Tonks never got to meet the previous headmaster, but both Mum and Dad described Headmaster Dippet as “fond of children” and “quite a bit daffy.” When she’d asked how that was different from Headmaster Dumbledore, her parents gave each other a very odd look and said that Tonks would figure that part out on her own.

She thinks she has most of it, that difference. It’s just hard to parse through her head that Albus Dumbledore doesn’t like children.

Ted Tonks and Andromeda Black were in the same year at Hogwarts, but not the same House. Not that it mattered. Dad followed along in his father’s footsteps and was smitten at once; Mum decided the half-black Spaniard Hufflepuff student was intriguing. For a member of the Black family, the intrigue is usually all it takes. Gran and Granddad sighed in resignation when they realized Ted was intent on staying with Andromeda in England, but they paid for every aspect of the wedding when they realized that Andromeda choosing Ted meant she’d been disowned by her entire family. Gran and Granddad then made a point of making it entirely clear that Andromeda was family to them, and the Blacks could go hang. Once they saw to it that Dad and Mum were settled, Tonks’s grandparents moved house straight back to Alicante, and they haven’t left it since.

Tonks adjusts her hair color, fortunately with only a minor bit of a headache. Black lashes, brown eyebrows, and magenta-colored hair to clash with her coat. Absolute punk, that, the sort that looks like a good dye-job. She learned her lesson on that one, nearly turning a simple outing into a complete cock-up. Muggles had freaked when she went roaming about Northampton with pink hair,
pink eyebrows, and matching pink eyelashes—it was a bit too obvious that she hadn’t used makeup or dye of any sort.

When she goes downstairs, Tonks is back to thinking only on maybe-breakfast before going out to the garden. Instead, she catches her mother trying to impersonate a Metamorphmagus.

“MUM!” Tonks presses her hand to her chest. “Bloody warn me when you’re going to try a new charm!”

Andromeda gives Tonks a bland stare that doesn’t quite hide her amusement. Her mum’s hair is no longer its usual dark brown that likes to masquerade as black. It’s now stark white, though still curled in the same style. “It isn’t a charm. Sit down; you still look as if a stiff breeze would blow you over.”

Tonks frowns and sits down in the kitchen. Before she can protest, Andromeda has put tea, more orange juice, toast, butter, and a blended lentil soup on the table. “That might be a bit much,” Tonks says of the soup. Merlin knows she’s almost sick of broth, but her belly is being a contrary creature.

“If it’s too heavy, the juice will help, and the toast won’t hurt, either,” Andromeda replies. “How are you, darling?”

“Not too bad compared to the last few days,” Tonks answers. “Less a lorry rollover and more a hay wagon. I woke up to a Patronus giving me ideas on how to get a head-start on getting over Riddle’s nonsense, so there’s that, too.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Andromeda bites her lip. “You know I’ve never said anything against your job, and I’m not about to start now. As your mother, all I’m going to say is that you’d better take your time to regain your strength. You can’t rush magical recovery, darling. Let it happen naturally, and I’ll fear for you less when that walking corpse makes his next move.”

Tonks smiles. “I will, Mum. Now what’s this about you not using charms on your hair? Did you decide to hit the local beauty parlor and have them bleach it out?”

“It’s not bleach.” Andromeda sighs. “You’ve seen the photos. You know how much Bellatrix and I…resemble each other.”

“Yeah.” It’s a bit creepy, actually, but the big difference is that Bellatrix looks like a bloody madwoman in almost every photo there is of her, and Mum just looks like Mum. “What does she have to do with anything?”

“My hair started turning stark white not long after you were born,” Andromeda admits, surprising Tonks into pausing mid-bite. The butter on the toast takes advantage and tries to escape down her chin. “I kept it dyed or charmed dark brown out of—well, vanity, I suppose. Ted swore up and down he didn’t mind, but I did. I thought it made me look old, even though I didn’t sport a single wrinkle. By the time you were ten years old, my hair was solid white.”

“Well, I’m with Dad. It’s gorgeous, Mum.”

Andromeda inclines her head in that graceful Lady Black nod that Tonks couldn’t mimic even on her best day. “Thank you.”

Tonks cleans up the escaped butter and gobbles down the last of the toast, chasing it with a gentle green tea. That’s a bit easier on her than the black leaf the elves were giving them, but Madam Pomfrey was muttering about health and tannic acids at the time. “You dropped the charms because Aunt Bellatrix is out of Azkaban.”
Andromeda’s smile is faint and a bit sad. “Given our similarities…I know her madness is obvious, but I’d rather a twitchy young Auror not mistake me for her. Kingsley told me that Bellatrix’s hair was still stark black but for a bit of white at the ears as recently as two months ago, so, there is one concern easily dealt with.”

Tonks drags her spoon through the lentil soup, nodding. She hasn’t been thinking much on Aunt Bellatrix and Mum looking alike; she’s been far more worried about what to do if Bellatrix Black Lestrange turned up in their garden, or in front of Twelve Grimmauld Place—or anywhere, really. Tonks will do her job, and it’ll be like putting down a mad dog, but she’s in no hurry to kill her aunt.

She’s in no hurry to let her aunt kill her, either. That won’t be happening, thank you very much.

“The Order is going to flip their wigs when they see you again,” Tonks says.

Andromeda looks a bit smug. “We’ll find out soon enough. Kingsley told me through the Floo that our next meeting is tomorrow morning at seven. It’s unfortunate that it has to be so early, but at least you’ll already be there. Don’t fall down the kitchen stairs again, darling.”

“That’s only happened twice!”

All right, more like four times, but Tonks is good at falling. Lots of practice.

Bleeding in the garden is a lot simpler than she always thought that sort of thing would be. They don’t even cover blood magic in an Auror’s training except to blither on about it being bad and illegal because it’s bad (with no details on why). Tonks needs her mum to tell her to prick the pads of each finger on her left hand, wait until the blood wells up, and then press her fingers against bare earth.

Tonks nearly bursts into a fit of giggles. “It feels like I’m high!”

Andromeda rolls her eyes. “That means it’s working, though I do hope the sensation fades when this is done.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Tonks asks, smiling as an awareness of home starts creeping back into her thoughts. She can sense her mum standing nearby. Dad is off in the field, yelling at the local rabbits for stealing the rhubarb before it could be pulled from the garden. Tonks still firmly believes that the rabbits and the squirrels are working together in a mammal mafia to divest the Tonks household of every edible bit of greenery the second it becomes ripe.

That’s where her sense of land and people ends. It’s nothing like it was just after the Queen dubbed her a war mage, but it’s a start. She’s been out and about enough to know that a start is sometimes all you need.

Besides, it worked on Remus.

“I’m a Black, darling.” Andromeda gives her a hand-up from the ground. Tonks feels a lot better, almost ready to downgrade the hay wagon to a monster toddler with a cricket bat. Her hand is already healed, as well, which is a grand bonus. “We were taught all sorts of things as children, and legality was not of much concern.”

“Thought as much.” Sirius’s response to being asked about his childhood is to smile and change the subject, or smile and leave the room like his arse is on fire. He’ll talk about Hogwarts years until he runs out of breath, but Tonks doesn’t even think Veritaserum would make Sirius willingly discuss life in Grimmauld Place when his parents and his aunt Cassiopeia were still alive.
Tonks shares a firecall with Kingsley at quarter of twelve, who tells her that the night guard for Grimmauld Place stuck out his shift by sitting next to the Floo in a full sulk. Tonks thinks that’s rather like Dawlish, but doesn’t say anything. Kingsley knows the man is half-useless, anyway. Frances Vance sent the morning shift away, telling them that she could bloody well use the Floo herself if His Grace needed a message sent to the Ministry.

“Are you certain you’re up to resume duty, Tonks?” Kingsley asks, looking solemn. “There was an incident this morning. It’s taken care of, with no losses or injuries on our side, but we can do without you a few more days if you need it.”

“I can’t just stay home doing bugger-all,” Tonks replies, shrugging. “I can recover at Grimmauld Place just as well as here. Besides, Remus will be heading back there today, and given what was done and how close we’re getting to the full moon, I’d say that the more people around that Remus likes, the happier everyone is going to be.”

Kingsley’s expression is odd. “Perhaps, yes. How is your Occlumency, Tonks?”

Tonks blinks a few times, surprised. “I was raised by a Black woman, Kingsley. I’ll never be a fabulous Legilimens, but my Occlumency was top by the time I graduated Hogwarts. Never asked an elf if I’ve got a mastery in it or anything, but no one could get into my head during Auror training.”

“Excellent.” Kingsley’s expression eases back into calm relaxation. Now her curiosity is really riding high. “You’ll be needing it. Don’t use the Floo; I doubt it would do you any favors right now, anyway. Have Andromeda take you to Grimmauld Place, and don’t kill the first stranger you see. Sirius has guests.”

“Sirius has guests? Wizengamot guests?”

Kingsley sighs and glances upwards. “Just don’t kill them. I’ll see you in the morning, Auror Tonks.”

“Sure, Boss,” Tonks returns cheekily, and steps back from the fireplace. That was a kind reminder about the Floo, too. Traveling that way with her sense of balance all buggered would not paint a pretty picture. She’d like to get through this day without vomiting on her own clothes.

At five of, Tonks is thinking on chancing another glass of orange juice before re-entering the world of pumpkin juice horror. Her progress to the fridge is interrupted by a house-elf who isn’t Kreacher. Fortunately—unfortunate, really—she knows this one. “Wotcher, Winky!”

Crouch’s sacked house-elf looks a great deal healthier than last year, not to mention happier. Winky has even improved to the point that, like certain others of Hogwarts’ elves, she’s taken to wearing a dress and jewelry. “Winky is greeting Auror Tonks,” the house-elf says, smiling. “Winky has a gift for you!”

“A gift?” Tonks tries not to blink like a fool at the idea of random gifts. “All right, I’ll bite. What sort?”

Winky pulls out something silver from her pocket and passes it over. “This is being for you as a war mage, even if you are an ill war mage.”

Tonks holds up the silver replica of the Black family crest with several gemstones hanging off of it. A pin on the back shows how it’s to be worn, and the whole of it is definitely goblin-made. “Oh, like what Salazar, Nizar, and the others have! That’s brill!” Then she notices the family motto is missing,
which is a relief, but the rest isn’t riding laurel leaves. Those are orange blossoms carved directly into the silver circle. “Oh,” she whispers. “For my grandmother’s family?”

Winky nods, smiling. “They is the only other family to you aside from the Blacks who has the right blood.”

Tonks drops to one knee and hugs a startled house-elf. “Thank you! Mi abuela will be so pleased that you thought of her!”

Winky is blushing when Tonks lets her go. “All the elves of Hogwarts made certain the crests are right for each war mage, Auror Tonks. Winky must go back now.” Then she leans forward. “Don’t let Lady Delacour tell you hers is prettier. Winky likes orange blossoms!” Then she Disapparates with a near-silent pop.

“What have you got here?” her mum asks as she comes down the stairs, dressed for leaving the house.

Tonks holds up the altered family crest. “A house-elf just brought it to me! Isn’t it lovely?”

Andromeda gives the crest a brief inspection, but her lips quirk in a fond smile when she notices the orange blossoms. “An excellent alteration. The Midlands Tonks haven’t a drop of nobility in their blood, but your father will like that part very much. What are the beads of mastery attached?”

“Oh, well—” Tonks points at the opal. “I know that one’s used for all three types of Transfiguration, which I think is daft because it means you won’t get recognition for a dual mastery. I suppose this one is for me being a Metamorphmagus. And oh, a Mind Magic one!” She brushes the white moonstone, which has a wonderful pearlescent sheen. “That’ll make Kingsley happy; he was just asking about my Occlumency. Guess I was doing better with the Legilimency training than I thought. That’s the war mage’s black diamond, but I don’t know what this one is for.” Tonks pokes at the brown stone, which has the sparkle of a diamond.

“A champagne diamond,” Andromeda identifies it at once. “I don’t know enough about the old mastery markings to even begin to hazard a guess. I suggest asking one of our ancient Slytherins.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.” Tonks thinks about it before she pins the crest into place on the inside of her jacket, just like Salazar does. Her Auror badge gets the same treatment, but on the opposite side. The opposing badges make her feel a bit like a street peddler hiding wares in their coat. “I’m ready to be off if you are.”

Andromeda takes her to the Apparition point in the park promptly at noon. They peer out from behind the tree and its Concealment charms. “Two of them, as usual,” Tonks observes of the Death Eaters watching the house.

“I don’t think I’ve seen the same set of Death Eaters here twice,” Andromeda says. “I wonder if he’s using it as an initiation.”

“What, fuck up with watching Grimmauld Place and then…” Tonks trails off, shivering. “Right. Initiation. I’d feel sorry for them, but they were the ones stupid enough to choose this mess.”

Andromeda’s smile is feral politeness. “Let’s stun one and Confound the other into thinking they need to get medical attention for their fainting spouse.”

Tonks grins. “I love you, Mum.”

They do exactly that, leaving a taller bloke struggling to figure out how he’s going to get a smaller
bloke to hospital. Tonks is tempted to tell them that the non-magical hospital might take a dim view to them being married, but the worst the staff in a London A&E will do is boot them out.

“Yes, that would be the worst of it now,” Andromeda murmurs as they cross the street. “But ten years ago, someone from that A&E might have made certain they were beaten to a pulp first, and then tossed out into the street for the police to collect.”

“Glad I missed out on that nonsense, then.” Tonks glances at Andromeda. “If it was ten years ago, you’d still have done the same thing to them, wouldn’t you?”

Andromeda is still smiling. “Death Eaters being beaten to a pulp by Muggles has a certain appeal.”

Tonks knocks on the door in the new patterns that Sirius set the same day he changed the old Fidelius Charm, which means Order members can still get into the house without difficulty. The same charm will tell Sirius that he has company, if not what sort.

“I still absolutely adore what Sirius has done with this place,” Andromeda murmurs as she closes the door behind them. “I never imagined the old family home would ever be so full of sunlight.”

“It’s bloody grand, isn’t it?” Tonks agrees, grinning. “SIRIUS!” she yells. “KITCHEN OR PARLOR!”

“WHO’S WITH YOU?” Sirius yells back. He sounds a bit paranoid, more like he did when the Order first started using Twelve Grimmauld Place as a meeting house.

“Just Mum!” Tonks thinks about it. “You’ve got a tattoo of a griffon on your right arse cheek, if you’re needing confirmation about who we are!”

“Tonks, most of my graduating class knew about that tattoo,” Sirius counters, appearing on the landing on the first floor. “You can do better than that.”

Mum raises an eyebrow. “Upon your leaving home, Uncle Alphard gave you precisely five hundred Galleons so you could establish yourself properly elsewhere. You gained the rest of his fortune as an inheritance when Bellatrix took offence to his hanging about with Blood Traitors such as us and killed him in 1977.”

Sirius blows out a sigh. “You could have stopped at the five hundred Galleons bit. Andromeda, what the hell did you do to your hair?”

“I did away with the charms,” Andromeda responds in a wry voice. “And I had no wish to resemble Bellatrix in any conceivable fashion.”

Sirius stares at her. “That would certainly do it. Look, there is…a situation. You can come upstairs after I have your word that you won’t kill anyone.”

“What are you hiding up there? More hippogriffs?” Tonks asks. “Because I’m going to stun a hippogriff if it comes after me, Sirius.”

Sirius looks resigned to an afternoon of madness. “Hippogriffs would be so much easier than this. No cursing, hexing, jinxing, slapping, or otherwise harming anyone in the parlor.”

Tonks exchanges glances with her mum. “All right, then. I’m not in much shape for any of that, so you don’t have to worry about me.”

Andromeda rolls her eyes. “I won’t do a thing unless someone draws a wand on me first. You know
that, Sirius.”

“Call me bloody paranoid for excellent reasons,” Sirius retorts.

Tonks and Andromeda climb the stairs a bit more cautiously than usual, though Tonks still takes a moment to be amazed that beautiful cherrywood was hiding beneath so many layers of filth, wax, lacquer, and terrible shellac.

Sirius leads them into the parlor, which has a small crowd in it. Tonks registers a tall black man with short hair and grey eyes who looks vaguely familiar, along with a seated brown-haired woman who reminds Tonks an awful lot of Madam Bones. There are two little ones darting about, playing tag in loops around the furniture. If the kids belong to Sirius’s guests, then the girl definitely takes after her dad, while the boy looks like his mum. All of them are dressed Muggle—no, non-magical. Non-magical. She needs to break that bloody habit.

The other man in the room is just as tall as the black bloke, but he’s pale like Mum. He has dark green eyes, short-trimmed black hair, and is dressed entirely non-magical, just like the others.

Tall and Pale raises his hand and offers them a weak wave. “Please no hexing.”

“Excuse me one moment. Family takes precedence,” Mum says to the two strangers, who just nod. Then she strides right over to the mystery man, wrapping him in a fierce hug. “Good fucking GOD! You owe me such an explanation, you daft little shit!”

Tonks stares at them. Andromeda Black Tonks almost never swears. She should know; she went through a year of doing her absolute best to incite her mother into swearing rants. Tonks had long since given up on the idea until she received her first injury during M.L.E. training, and that because it was someone else’s blunder. Poor Johnson’s never really been the same.

“You were too young when you saw him last. You might not recognize him from the portraits or photographs, either, given how out of date they are,” Sirius offers, giving Tonks a faint smile. “Andromeda, let the man breathe, for God’s sake.”

Andromeda lets go of whoever her victim is. He does, indeed, gasp for breath. “You should have warned me!” she yells at Sirius.

Sirius shrugs. “How?” Andromeda’s expression goes blank with incomprehension, so there must not have been a decent warning method if Mum can’t think of one.

“This is truly interesting and all, but someone please tell me what I’m bloody missing!” Tonks orders, almost bouncing on her toes as excitement overcomes exhaustion. This is something unexpected, and a good mystery has always made her excitable. It does wonders for her Auror career.

Sirius waits until the two children are distracted by a kid’s book with paper pop-up pictures that move, which they’re utterly entranced by. “Cousin Nymphadora Aitana Tonks, who prefers to be known as Tonks alone, I present to you my not-dead younger brother, your cousin Regulus Arcturus Black.” He even includes the sweeping bow that accompanies proper Pure-blood introductions.

Tonks stares at Regulus Black, who mimics Sirius’s earlier shrug. “Uh…Kreacher is absolutely bloody convinced that you died to retrieve that nasty Locket Horcrux,” is all she can think to say. Nice to meet you just seems the awkward way to go, even if it’s better manners.

Regulus sighs. “He already knows I’m alive again. My trousers are still soaked with house-elf tears. You have no idea how difficult it was to convince him that it was okay to go back to Hogwarts. I
thought I was going to spend the rest of the day with a house-elf glued to my leg!”

Andromeda frowns and steps back. “I know you are exactly who you appear to be, given that there are protections on this home that would help us to avoid…familial treachery, but how is it you’re still alive?”

“Because I’m the one who saved his life.”

Tonks turns around to find that Salazar, Nizar, Professor Snape, and Professor McGonagall have joined them. She was so focused on mystery people that she didn’t even hear the stupid door open and shut. If Alastor finds out, Tonks will never hear the end of it.

Also, what the sodding hell is familial treachery? Mum’s been holding out on her again, which is just not on.

“I apologize for not warning you, Andromeda,” Salazar continues. “But this was an unplanned and inconvenient resurrection.”

“I said I was sorry for that part already,” Regulus retorts before Mum can say anything. “I refuse to be sorry for the rest of it, though.”

Salazar knows everyone in the room; Tonks can tell, so that’s reassuring. Nizar is doing his impassive diplomatic face bit, so she isn’t getting a read from him. Professor Snape looks politely infuriated, the sort of face he used to make during her Hogwarts years when someone did something he liked, but he wasn’t all right with people knowing he was happy about it. Professor McGonagall is regarding the black man and the seated woman with wide-eyed, shocked recognition. That’s useful. That means the new folks were once known folks, and thus there is less chance Tonks will need to perform her day job and arrest them.

Andromeda glances at Regulus, then at Salazar. “Then I thank you for safeguarding one of my House.”

“Who else is here, then?” Tonks interrupts before things can get weirder. She’s had time to get used to the idea that Cousin Regulus died on their side, betraying the Death Eaters and Riddle both to fetch that Horcrux locket. She doesn’t quite know how to cope with having that family member suddenly return from the grave. Adding Pure-blood nonsense on top of it all isn’t helping.

Sirius is looking at the late arrivals, most of them still clustered in the parlor doorway. “I wasn’t expecting you to turn up, to be honest. Salazar, yes, but not the rest of you.”

“Regulus phoned to tell me you were nearly fucking eaten this morning,” Salazar retorts. “Of course I’m going to be passing that sort of news along!”

“Eaten?” Tonks and Mum exclaim at the same time.

“There was a Dementor in Barnard Park this morning,” Sirius informs them. Tonks thinks he has to be stuffed to the gills with Calming Draughts to be that collected and steady, especially after dealing with a Dementor and a not-dead brother. “It’s why we have three dead people who are not actually deceased in my house, four Aurors who are really bloody confused and sworn to secrecy over the whole matter, and Kingsley probably ready to crawl up my backside just to find out what the hell is going on.”

“Be glad we didn’t bring the ancient half-Veela with us to make things even more complicated, then,” Nizar says dryly, eying the folks that Tonks finds vaguely familiar. “None of you are Slytherins, so I’m sharing in Tonks’s curiosity. Who are you?”
“Caradoc Dearborn and Teresa Bones Jugson,” Professor Snape says in flat disbelief.

The woman rolls her eyes. “I’ve been widowed from Ivan for quite a while now, Professor Snape. Teresa Bones will do fine.”

“I took her name when we got married, anyway,” her husband says. “Plenty of Dearborns still out there, so why not? Those are our kids running about. Little Harriet is eight, and Lysander is an oversized five.”

Andromeda regards them with a curious stare. “Others will find your return far more credible than Teresa’s, given that she left behind a body and you did not.”

That’s when recognition for the bloke clicks for Tonks—Caradoc Dearborn is in one of the old Order of the Phoenix photos that Alastor likes to carry around, though he doesn’t show them to people all that often. Tonks has seen photographs of Teresa Bones before, but she doesn’t look the same, not really. Hair and eye color are a proper match, but her face isn’t as sharp, her eyes not as innocent. She looks her age, whereas Mum’s photos are all of a seventeen-year-old girl.

Amelia Bones’s baby sister is still alive, but that’s for Madam Bones to panic about. Tonks is a lot more concerned with an arrangement made in 1971 between two longtime Hogwarts friends named Andromeda Black and Teresa Bones. After Andromeda got pregnant, they agreed to be godmothers to each other’s children—Teresa to Tonks, and Andromeda was meant to be the same for the deceased Bones-Jugson twins.

“You’re my godmother.” Tonks feels like she’s stupidly stating the obvious.

Teresa Bones’s smile is just like a mother’s: warm, loving, and a little bit sad. “Yes, dear. I certainly am.”
Hidden Lives

Chapter Summary

“What did I say I was going to do to you if the miraculous event ever occurred that might allow me to leave that painting? What did I say I would do if you were foolish enough to join that walking corpse?”

i.e. What Everyone Recently UnDeceased Has Been Doing With Themselves And/Or Why

Severus is utterly done with this week. He’ll be glad when it’s dark and the new week officially begins with the Shabbat. As glad as he is that sensible Caradoc, reportedly not an idiot Teresa Bones, and Regulus Black are not dead, he is uncertain what the next step should be.

“Calming Draught,” Black says to him, looking a bit drained beneath the potion-created calm. “That’s what I’m bloody well doing.”

Severus doesn’t like where the advice came from, but it’s sensible. He should have done it already, given that it seems he has finally—after years of trying to figure out that boundary—hit his absolute limit on what he is willing to endure in a single week. Damn Voldemort, anyway.

After he pockets the empty phial, Severus watches as Nizar suddenly picks a throw pillow from the sofa, crosses the room, and smacks Regulus in the face with it. To Severus’s surprise, Regulus makes a pained sound and hits the ground in a sprawl. “What did I say I was going to do to you if the miraculous event ever occurred that might allow me to leave that painting? What did I say I would do if you were foolish enough to join that walking corpse?”

“You Transfigured that pillow’s density,” Regulus gurgles from the floor. “God, that hurts. My nose hates you. Uhm—you said you’d hit me in the face with a brick?”

“Congratulations. You were sensible enough to un-join the walking corpse, and thus it’s merely a very heavy pillow.” Nizar then drops it onto Regulus’s chest; Regulus lets out another muffled wheeze and instinctively clutches at the pillow.

“I missed you, too,” Regulus gasps. “I’d forgotten you were a complete prick.”

“Please. It still wasn’t an actual brick,” Nizar replies. To Severus’s amusement, Regulus now looks as dazed as Nymphadora, who clearly was not expecting to suddenly have a surviving godparent. At least Alphard Black survived lived long enough for Nymphadora to have memories of her godfather.

Nizar’s actions seem to snap Minerva out of her shock. “How is it you’re alive?” she asks Caradoc and Teresa in a stunned whisper, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

“Saul,” Teresa says, inclining her head but otherwise not moving. There are complicated metal braces on both of her legs; a set of non-magical crutches are leaning against the nearest wall. Severus hides a disturbed expression as he realizes how terrible her initial injuries must have been if she was rescued by Salazar and still is partially crippled.

“The same, to Saul’s surprise,” Caradoc adds. “I stumbled onto a pair of Death Eaters by accident.”
“Saul, hmm?” Minerva repeats, glancing at Salazar.

Salazar finds his way to the closest unoccupied armchair to sit down. Severus belatedly realizes that sitting is an excellent idea and claims a different chair. He might now be enjoying an artificial calm, but even after bleeding on Hogwarts’ stone, he’s still bloody exhausted. “I used that name during World War II,” Salazar says. “Saul Luiz. I didn’t see a need to change it.”

“When did you lot find out Saul was Salazar?” Tonks asks the others, grinning.

Regulus shrugs, which is an intriguing response, but Teresa and Caradoc exchange wry looks. “We found out last summer,” Teresa replies. “Saul didn’t think it necessary that we know until then.”

“It bloody well wasn’t!”

Severus is still thinking on Teresa Bones’s injuries, and—as Andromeda noted—her confirmed body discovered with the other deceased members of her family. Salazar has already revealed his habit of leaving corpses bearing permanent Polyjuice disguises, so it must have been so in her case. He doubts the same can be said of her twin infants, husband, or anyone else who was in the Bones Manor that summer evening in 1973.

Severus and Lily were hanging out in his bedroom the day after the attack, one of the rare instances in which Severus could take advantage of the fact that his parents were not at home and invite her over for the day. Lily had been ready to put her trainer up James Potter’s arse for his mocking their ignorance of “real” music by October of the previous school term. Thus, they were listening to Severus’s illicit Wizarding Wireless setup so they could both gain familiarity with wizarding music. Then the Ministry’s news agency interrupted the feed to announce the attack on the Bones family. Most of the Bones bloodline had been murdered the previous night. Only two survived due to the mere fortune of not being at home. The slaughter was reported to be the work of suspected magical insurgents with a grudge against the Ancient House of Bones. Nothing was yet said of Voldemort, You-Know-Who, Death Eaters, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. All he and Lily knew was that the whispers in Hogwarts that year had suddenly become terrifying reality. The war was real, even if the Ministry wouldn’t admit to it.

The Bones family’s slaughter always bothered Severus, even when he agreed to take the Dark Mark. It made no tactical sense; it made no sense in view of the Dark Lord’s supposed support of the Purebloods of Wizarding Britain. The only thing it did was stir fear—a great deal of it. When Severus finally realized that fear was all the Dark Lord was interested in crafting, the slaughter was no longer a mystery.

Nizar takes pity on Regulus and helps him get to his feet. “You are so exceptionally tall. It really isn’t fair. You’re taller than Severus. Is this a development that happened within Hogwarts, or afterwards?”

“Bit of both, really,” Regulus says, and is then hugged by the much shorter Slytherin. “Thank you for not squeezing the life out of me like Andromeda did.”

Nizar releases him and smiles. “No, I merely hit you in the face.”

Severus has no idea he’s found his voice until it emerges from his throat in something close to a growl. “I hated the thought that you were dead, Regulus. You were one of the few people I knew in those days who was even remotely intelligent.”

“And you didn’t hold my brother’s reputation against me. That was nice, too.” Regulus looks apologetic. “I’m sorry. If it hadn’t been for Bellatrix, I’d never have done it.”
“Bellatrix?” Sirius narrows his eyes. “You were family, and supposedly loyal to her favorite Dark Lord. What did she do?”

“Bellatrix didn’t trust me,” Regulus says, “and it was a distrust that grew as the months passed. I never slipped; I think Bellatrix is just that stark raving mad, Sirius. It was either get out by performing a very difficult good deed, or let the bi—” Regulus stutters to a halt and glances at the children. “Er, let the woman kill me.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “Nice save.”

“Between you and Teresa, I don’t dare,” Regulus says. “Karl is the one who keeps forgetting, but Harriet decided he had to feed a swear jar every time he slips and says a word he shouldn’t.”

“Karl?” Minerva queries, still regarding Caradoc and Teresa as if they’re ghosts. Severus knows she’ll get over it soon enough, but she is much like himself; Minerva expects the worst from this war, not gifts such as these.

“That would be me. I couldn’t exactly go by Caradoc after I ‘died,’” Caradoc explains, smiling. “My kids don’t know us as anything other than Karl and Trinity Johnson—oh, and they think that’s a Muggle-born named Robert Allan Black standing over there,” he adds, gesturing at Regulus. “That’s going to be an interesting explanation.” He glances over at the two children in question. “Harriet, baby, I know you’re listening.”

“I’m totally not,” Harriet mumbles without lifting her head from the magical children’s book. Severus decides that Harriet is definitely not going to Sort Slytherin.

Ellie Black claimed to be the Muggle-born in her marriage that produced Fearless Jane. Perhaps she was being honest, after all, though Severus is not certain he wants to live in a world in which both of the Black brothers managed to procreate.

Severus pinches the bridge of his nose. This situation is far too complicated, and without a firm nudge, the answers he wants will be too slow in coming. Also, Harriet is definitely not going to Sort Slytherin. “Regulus: given the Horcrux that you were supposed to have died retrieving, I would very much like to hear an explanation for your continued existence that is a bit more comprehensive than blaming Salazar.”

“For all of you, really,” Minerva adds, pressing her lips together. “Especially given…current circumstances.”

“Right, yeah.” Regulus looks to Salazar, who rolls his eyes and then shrugs. “Best settle in then. This is going to take a while.”

* * * *

It does, indeed, take a very long while. Nizar drifts off twice while listening, but as he doesn’t lose track of the narrative, knows he didn’t truly fall asleep. The entirety of the tale is fascinating, stretching as it does from 1973 through the end of the first war, with the three survivors granting them details of the lives they built in the non-magical world. He gains as much from what they do not say as what they do admit to.

Regulus started his career as a Death Eater by graduating a year early, with straight Os on his chosen
N.E.W.T.s, just to please Voldemort. Regulus’s dedication impressed the Dark Lord, who immediately inducted Regulus to the outermost of Voldemort’s three inner circles—those, like Severus, who Voldemort trusted above all others. For given values of trust, anyway.

Regulus was intelligent enough to realize within scant months that he’d made a very stupid, deadly mistake. He was stewing over those very thoughts when he caught Salazar’s attention. Regulus was spying for the Underground by February of 1980. He was the one to bring news of the prophecy to Salazar; it was Salazar who recognized that Voldemort had been granted only part of a whole. At the time, they all hoped that Voldemort’s incomplete knowledge would always be to their advantage.

Nizar thinks that, prior to thirty-first July of last year, it was exactly that. He isn’t much concerned about the first prophecy any longer. He now believes that it fulfilled its role the moment Harry James Potter ceased to exist as a legal entity, and that fucking Horcrux shard was destroyed.

Regulus changed nothing of his behavior when attending to Voldemort, but Bellatrix’s attention grew more unwanted, and more intense. By September 1980, she’d twice tried to kill him. That was also when Regulus discovered the Horcrux Locket’s existence by way of Kreacher. Regulus granted Voldemort the means to summon the house-elf, if he wished for assistance, but Regulus hadn’t expected Voldemort to use Kreacher as a laboratory rat for a poisonous potion meant to safeguard a Horcrux. Not only had Voldemort inadvertently given away one of his most closely guarded secrets, he’d also infuriated Regulus Black. Nizar could have warned the stupid fuck that pissing off a Black was a death sentence, even if it took a while for the actual dying to happen. Not that the walking corpse would have listened.

Part of this tale they know, but hearing how Salazar manipulated the very stone of Voldemort’s supposedly impenetrable cave trap to retrieve Regulus, saving him from a horrific number of Inferi, still grants Nizar a vast sense of relief. Sirius looks ready to weep in gratitude.

“Then how did you not know what it was already?” Minerva asks, giving Salazar a piercing look. “Or was that simply excellent acting?”

“We truly didn’t know what it was,” Regulus answers for Salazar. “Kreacher didn’t see the Horcrux itself until Riddle was putting it into the completed fountain. By then, the potion Riddle had forced him to test had left Kreacher all but blind; he only knew it was gold. I didn’t go blind when I drank my way through that stupid fountain’s contents, but I was most certainly hallucinating at the end. Just as Kreacher once told me, all I could tell Saul afterward was that the Horcrux I entrusted to Kreacher had been something made from gold.”

“I didn’t see it, either. Kreacher was already away with the true Horcrux when I arrived, and I wasn’t much in the mood to linger in that cave, not with so many Inferi ready to rend us to bits,” Salazar continues. “The decision to put a false copy of Marion’s locket into the fountain was Regulus’s idea. He wanted to mislead Twit Riddle into thinking he had his ancestor’s blessing. Of course, he ruined that plan on the day we were to act on retrieving the Horcrux by adding a note to the locket’s confines.”

Regulus shrugs. “I didn’t think Riddle would ever read it, but since word has probably gotten back to him by now that I’m very much not dead, I would guess that he visited that cave at first opportunity. I’m surprised all of Britain didn’t hear the angry shrieking that would have resulted.”

“He knows when his Horcruxes are destroyed—” Severus begins to say, but Nizar shakes his head.

“Actually, I think it’s dependent on the circumstances,” Nizar says. “He didn’t know he only had two left until I told him. I gathered from his reaction, though, that he didn’t know which two—and I imagine he didn’t dare to go rushing off to check each one, just in case my words were a trap meant
to convince him to reveal the location of the remaining soul jars.”

“Why, *why* did you tell him there were only two remaining?” Salazar asks, glaring at Nizar.

“Because it made him angry, and that is always entertaining,” Nizar replies. “Also, it was just after
the Ides of March raids, and I might’ve wanted to give him reason for concern so he wouldn’t be so
bloody smug.”

Caradoc Dearborn is the former Hufflepuff who convinced Alastor Moody not to obliterate the
Order’s first usefully gained Death Eater spy, which makes Nizar inclined to think favorably of him
from the start. Caradoc was attacked by Death Eaters just after leaving a meeting held between Peter
Pettigrew, Caradoc, and James Potter in March 1980. None of them have the delight of blaming the
rat; Pettigrew hadn’t yet betrayed the Order to become a Death Eater. The attack wasn’t expected by
either side; Caradoc just happened to have the ill fortune of using an Apparition point that was, that
night, being used by Death Eaters.

“I was to meet that night with Evan Rosier Junior and Hillaria Bole under the guise of Augustine
Travers, who has often been so very useful for that sort of thing,” Salazar says. “I arrived in time to
prevent Rosier from finishing his favorite sport of literally obliterating his enemies, Confounded both
of them, hid the victim, and then sent Rosier on his merry way with Bole, both convinced Rosier had
done his usual bit of destruction. I didn’t expect him to brag of it so thoroughly that Alastor Moody
would take it as a personal affront, but I did not much mourn Rosier’s death.”

“I don’t think anyone did except his aunt,” Severus mutters.

Salazar nods in agreement with Severus’s words. “It was a bit close in terms of rescue, but Caradoc
certainly didn’t help matters. He was convinced I was a Death Eater who was making off with him
for my own nefarious purposes. I all but had to drop him in Teresa’s lap to convince him that he was
being rescued, not used for ritualistic spare parts.”

Teresa Louise Bones, Nizar learns, is the younger sister of Madam Amelia Bones, but they both
were elder sisters to their murdered brother, Lysander, who was fifth-year Hufflepuff Susan Bones’s
father. Susan is the only child he had time to sire during his brief marriage to also-murdered Christina
Fawley.

“Christina Fawley. She had a sister, did she not?” Severus asks, his intense gaze resting on Teresa’s
face.

Teresa frowns in thought. “I believe so. Her older sister was a Squib, I think, one the family sent off
to a non-magical boarding school. I’m not certain what became of her after that. Why?”

“It is not my place to say,” Severus replies in a stiff voice. Teresa gives him an odd look, but seems
content to let the matter drop. Nizar wonders how Diana Fawley Prince will feel when she learns that
she has a niece.

Caradoc was badly injured, but in comparison to the woman who would eventually be his wife, he
fared well. Teresa Louise Bones was married just after her graduation from Hogwarts to the man she
dated for her last three years of schooling, Ivan Jugson—who would have been Gryffindor Vanity
Jugson’s eldest uncle. Ivan was utterly against anything Voldemort and the Death Eaters stood for,
and Teresa suspects it was one of the reasons her family was targeted the following summer of 1973.
Ivan’s twin, Richard Jugson, wanted to enact revenge against his brother for marrying in with labeled
Blood Traitors.

“Richard Jugson was also performing the task expected of him as a newly initiated Death Eater,”
Salazar says quietly. “But he took the idea a bit further than anyone else in Riddle’s ranks would do but for Bellatrix Lestrange.”

The Bones slaughter was the event that made Wizarding Britain sit up and pay attention, the act that made its citizens begin to talk of conspiracy and murder. The rumors were not helped by the fact that the Ministry refused to admit that Voldemort and his Death Eaters posed a genuine threat, or that they were already in a state of war. That wouldn’t occur until Madam Bagnold took office in 1975, when her predecessor resigned in disgrace.

_Ah, history repeats itself_, Nizar thinks sourly. Cornelius Fudge must have thought it brilliance to model his career on the last idiot who was forced to resign when public outcry regarding Voldemort became intolerable.

“Amelia was pursuing her studies within the M.L.E. and remained in London. It was early June, so Lysander was still at Hogwarts. I didn’t witness the death of my children that night. Aside from my survival, that was the only mercy granted to me.” Teresa’s voice is steady, but her eyes are expressive enough to reflect lingering grief. “Our eldest brother Edgar, his wife, their children, our parents, my mother’s parents, my father’s brothers, their wives and children, my deceased aunt’s husband and children—everyone came to the ancestral estate to spend time together as a family every June, and we made no secret of it.

“I was still recovering from what had been a difficult pregnancy. Ivan died defending me from three of Riddle’s Death Eaters. Edgar, who was part of the Order of the Phoenix, died attempting to save both of us. Then those same three Death Eaters dragged me from the family home as it went up in flames. They were about to make further sport of my broken body when a fourth Death Eater joined them. Imagine my shock when the newest Death Eater lifted a wand and Confunded the other three.”

Salazar looks bitter. “I didn’t know the raid was occurring until it was already a slaughter in progress. There were only three of us in those days, and…no matter. Attempting to save one was better than none at all.”

“I was barely aware of what was happening by that point, but I did notice when the new arrival plucked a strand of my hair and shoved it into a phial of Polyjuice,” Teresa says dryly. “Then George Chambers was convinced to remove his mask to drink the potion.”

Nizar resists the urge to sigh. That does explain Ravenclaw Jonathan Chambers’ current stupidity, especially if being an idiot Death Eater is a family tradition.

“That jolted me back into full awareness. The idea that the Chambers family was going along with this madness when they’d been friends of my family for ages…” Teresa still seems bewildered by that treachery. “Once George’s clothes were Transfigured to be a match for mine, he was granted a rather unpleasant death of crushed bones and ribs.”

“It had to be a match, or so close that the remaining Death Eaters wouldn’t think on it.” Salazar narrows his eyes. “Chambers is fortunate I had no time to linger, worried as I was about Teresa’s survival, or it would not have been such a swift end.” Minerva reaches out and puts her hand on Salazar’s shoulder. Salazar smiles briefly and rests his hand atop hers.

“I didn’t yet realize I was being rescued, even when the remaining Death Eaters were told that they’d lost George Chambers to the fire, but still had the victory of ‘my’ corpse to claim,” Teresa says. “Even if Saul hadn’t told them, I doubt they would have noticed they were lacking a companion. It was the first time I’d ever seen battle fever, though sadly not the last.”

Teresa’s description of her injuries, and her recovery, is stark and bare. She requires braces on her
legs and the assistance of crutches to stand and walk; the devices are magical or non-magical dependent on her plans for the day. Sometimes the braces aren’t enough, and it’s a wheeled chair, instead.

She joined the Underground without hesitation, though much of her work in the beginning was in the sorting and brokering of information. She confesses guilt in regards to allowing her surviving siblings to believe her dead, guilt that was worsened when Lysander and his wife were murdered in early spring 1981, leaving Susan to be raised by her aunt Amelia. “I knew my sister never wanted children, but I also knew Amelia would raise Susan properly even if it killed her.”

Teresa and Caradoc didn’t court each other until the first war was declared ended on first November 1981. They wed by non-magical law in 1984, but put aside the notion of children until she’d completed her time at university, gaining a master’s degree in botany for the study of medicinal plants.

Hearing that Teresa and Caradoc named their first child Harriet Jane because of Harry James Potter is just so fucking odd that Nizar does his best to simply ignore it. Their son being named Lysander Francis Bones II at least makes sense to him.

“What my wife isn’t saying is that between the uni degree and her magical masteries in Herbology and Alchemy, she is basically a mad scientist,” Caradoc announces proudly. Teresa smiles and rolls her eyes at him, but doesn’t deny it.

“Did you go to university?” Andromeda asks Caradoc politely.

“Me? Nah. I had enough Muggle-born education prior to Hogwarts that I didn’t have much interest,” Caradoc says. “I work as a livery driver for those with expensive tastes. It pays well enough, and it means I know most of southern England like the back of my hand. I did keep up with my Herbology, among other things, so I have a mastery in that, too.”

Salazar is unimpressed by Caradoc’s deflection. “Caradoc is a Water-Speaker with a Defence mastery for Warding Magics. That’s aside from the Mind Magic mastery, and Teresa’s additional mastery in Weaving Magic.”

“Water-Speaker.” Nizar grins at Caradoc. “I cannot wait until it’s possible to introduce you to our resident Elemental Magician.”

“What about you, Regulus? Did you continue your career of being an utter swot?” Sirius asks, smiling at his brother. Nizar is glad to see them getting on so well, as he well remembers everything Regulus told him of two siblings at war.

Regulus counts each accomplishment off on his fingers. “I’ve magical masteries in Mind Magic, Astronomy, and Arithmancy. Then I got curious, went to uni, and came out of it with a combined doctorate in scientific astronomy and mathematics. It all complements each other nicely.”

“Swot,” Sirius repeats. “I’m proud of you.”

Regulus stares at him. “You know, when they said you’d cracked, I didn’t believe it. Now I do.”

Andromeda smirks at Sirius. “One gets used to Sirius’s odd fits of maturity, cousin…when he chooses to have them.”

“Hey!”

Andromeda ignores Black’s sputtering. “Are you married yet, Regulus?”
Regulus appears to be trying to physically retreat from the question. “Whether I’m married or not, dating or not—I can’t tell you. Teresa chose to join Caradoc and reside here with the children, but I’m not forcing anyone else to do the same thing unless it becomes necessary.”

*Interesting*, Nizar thinks. That doesn’t contradict Ellie Black’s story, though he does wonder if Regulus decided to find someone who looked as much like a Black as possible to marry. Granted, enough Blacks were kicked out of their family to have left an entire hoard of descendants behind. He does hope that if she is one of those descendants, Ellie Black is not as closely related to Regulus as Walburga Black and Orion Black were to each other.

Then again, Regulus could also be dissembling in order to protect someone else. Either is possible; Edward Black has the family’s grey eyes, though his have stronger hints of blue and violet, while Fearless Jane has black hair that responds to light in the same manner that Regulus’s and Sirius’s hair does.

Young Lysander seems more interested in exploring a seemingly endless stack of magical children’s books, but Harriet listened to everything that was said. Once she realizes that story time is all but over for the afternoon, she stands up and makes her way over to Severus.

Severus is slumped in his armchair, his arms hanging down the chair’s sides, his chin nearly resting on his chest. He isn’t sleeping; his eyes are burning with a blend of feelings he probably has no desire to contend with at all. To anyone who didn’t know him, he would appear to be viciously angry.

“If you look scary on purpose?” Harriet asks Severus.

“Severus blinks twice, startled to be addressed by one of the children. “Yes.”

“Oh.” Harriet frowns. “Why would you want to go and do that, then?”

“Because frightened people are more inclined to grant me useful information, often in a swift manner, so that they can escape my terrifying presence,” Severus responds dryly.

“Why would you need to scare them?”

Severus raises an eyebrow. “Because I want to live.”

Harriet snickers. “Okay. That’s a good reason.” Then she wanders off to join her mother on the other sofa, leaving Severus bewildered.

“You and small children.” Nizar bites back a smile as Severus glares at him. “The smart ones see right through you.”

“She does have intelligence in her favor, yes,” Severus grudgingly admits. “When is that blasted Order meeting scheduled for?”

“Seven o’clock in the morning, because Kingsley is a horrible man,” Sirius answers. “Look, I know this is a place you’d rather not be, Snape, but none of you look to be in any shape to be Apparating anywhere else, even if you asked the house-elves to do it for you. There are plenty of bedrooms upstairs that now have mattresses which were crafted in this decade instead of a century ago. Pick one and go off for a nap. Take Nizar with you.” Sirius glances at Salazar, who has fallen asleep in his chair. “Maybe drag that one along behind you.”

“Thank you, Sirius,” Nizar says before Severus can argue. “That is very kind.” Then he looks at Severus and lets the thought sit in front of his shields. *Even with house-elf assistance, do you really*
want to Apparate to Hogwarts, then Apparate back here again at 6:30 tomorrow?

Severus’s glare intensifies. None of them fared well on the journey south except for Minerva. Bleeding on the earth had helped, but it wasn’t a miracle cure. You’re fortunate that I’m too tired to give a fuck.

“I’ll take him.” Minerva’s version of rousing Salazar is to use her wand to lift him by his t-shirt until he wakes up, senses movement, and clings to the armchair in a panic. Then he realizes where he is, and what Minerva is up to, and scowls.

“I love you, Lioness, but that is a dirty trick.”

“It’s an effective one. Come upstairs and have a kip in a proper bed with me,” Minerva orders. Salazar grins and follows after her without another word spoken.

Sirius turns to Nizar, a bewildered expression on his face. “Was she wearing a ring?”

Nizar gives him an innocent look in response. “Perhaps.” Then he stands up, wobbles, growls something under his breath that is definitely swearing and most certainly Cumbric, which saves him from a mother’s potential wrath. “Come on upstairs, then, to welcome the joy of sleeping in a real bed with no mold.”

“As long as we don’t choose the wrong bed and end up woken by an angry werewolf,” Severus mutters. “Where the he—where is Lupin, anyway?”

“Probably still dealing with his dead grandmother.” Sirius shakes his head. “That woman is terrifying. Tonks, go up to your room so they know where not to bunk. Let Andromeda help you get there; you look like you’re about to fall on your own face. I’ll head over to Wales and find out why Remus has been delayed, and also warn him that there are dead people who are not ghosts in the house. If I’m delayed, Frances will wake you all for dinner. I wouldn’t try to get out of the meal. She’s vicious if she’s thwarted.”

“Want me to go with you to Wales?” Tonks offers, to Andromeda’s quiet displeasure. “I’m really soft on the idea of meeting Remus’s grandmother, whether she’s a ghost or not.”

“Do you want to be interrogated for the rest of the day?” Sirius counters.

“Maybe in about a week,” Tonks says, taking a step back. “Let’s go, Mum. Nice to meet you all, even if it’s bloody weird.”

“You get used to the oddity,” Caradoc says in reassurance. “Eventually.”

“Regulus.” Severus waits for Regulus to turn to him. “I’m…pleased that you are not dead.”

“Pleased enough to not poison me for it?” Regulus asks with a hopeful grin.

Severus narrows his eyes. “I’ll think on it. I’ll see the rest of you at dinner.”

Nizar and Severus head directly for the stairs after Regulus nods and Sirius waves them off. “We should go to the third floor,” Nizar suggests. “From what I’ve overheard, everyone else lives on the fourth or the second, so I doubt we’ll be bothered.”

“Fab,” Severus grumbles under his breath. Nizar snorts in amusement at the petulant anger bundled into that single syllable, knowing it’s more stubborn pretense right now than true ire. Severus hasn’t stopped loathing Sirius Black, but Nizar suspects that Severus would also sleep in an occupied tomb
at the moment and not care.

The room Nizar selects is much improved over his original inspection of Twelve Grimmauld Place. It has an eastern window, which isn’t of much use in this part of London, but the room will still see sunlight before a window facing any other direction. The bed is an old construct of dark wood with columns that go from floor to ceiling. They remind him of the beds in Castile and Burgos, though this bed has a crawlspace beneath instead of being set directly onto the floor.

Severus does little more than remove his shoes before stripping off his robe and jacket and crawling directly into the bed. “You owe me so much for encouraging me to sleep in this blasted fucking house.”

“I’d give you a blow job if I thought you could remain awake for it,” Nizar teases, and is immediately glared at again.

“Nizar. I don’t want to contemplate those things here!”

“Too late.” Nizar crawls into bed and lets his head thump down on a pillow that smells too much like the plastics he’s encountered. It’s not pleasant; he hopes the smell dissipates quickly. “Just think, though: tomorrow you may get to watch Albus Dumbledore be utterly confounded by the idea that there are three people who survived the last war, and he didn’t have a whit to do with it.”

Severus cracks open one eye again. “Three people he can’t even hope to control.”

“Not at all.” Nizar smiles. “I think that’s definitely worth the early waking.”

“And the revelation of the existence of Regulus Black in regards to Ellie and Jane Black?” Severus asks.

Nizar frowns. “I’m not saying a word. She asked us not to speak of that meeting, and I’m holding to it. If they’re wed, Regulus can introduce his wife on his own time.”

“If?”

“He wasn’t prancing. Married Black men always liked to show off when they were happily wed,” Nizar mutters. “Granted, he’s been in the role of a spy for sixteen years, so what the fuck do I know?”

He’s almost settled for sleep when Severus asks, “Why could Myrddin understand modern English?”

Nizar frowns. “I hadn’t realized I used that language in the memory. I’m not certain I ever thought on it; I was a bit too busy being furious.”

“That is understandable.”

“Myrddin was…” Nizar tries to find the right words. “Myrddin was the sort of Seer who either didn’t have the means to control what he saw, or he didn’t care to bother with it. He drifted in time while remaining exactly where he was. There were several moments when he expected others to have already done something, and was always surprised to find that it hadn’t happened yet. That is probably where his understanding would have come from, but I don’t recall if he ever mentioned anything more of it.”

Severus looks slightly alarmed. “Does Miss Lovegood do the same? Drift in time?”

“I rather doubt it,” Nizar says, yawning. “She doesn’t seem interested in that sort of magic.”
Severus nods in acceptance, though he still seems disturbed by the possibility. “While I have you talking: what did Bathsheda Babbling do to irritate you that you’ve spent a week plotting revenge?”

“No, I was perhaps an hour plotting revenge. I otherwise spent a great deal of this week unconscious,” Nizar replies. “Bathsheda is translating a rune incorrectly, and teaching that incorrect translation. When I noticed and pointed it out, she refused to admit the error, citing multiple sources that are all far younger than myself. The fact that all of her spells using that rune in its incorrect translation fail was also not enough for her to admit she might be wrong.”

Severus sounds irritated and bewildered. “I know she’s stubborn, but this seems excessive. Why the hell is she refusing to listen to you?”

“Because I’m a mere Defence instructor. She answers to a higher academic calling,” Nizar says with as much sarcasm as his tired brain can muster.

“Only an hour spent on vengeful plotting?” Nizar opens his eyes to find Severus smirking at him. “What did you do to her on Tuesday?”

“Using the correct translation, I drew glowing runes in the air beneath her nose, casting a spell that caused herself and everyone who set foot into her classroom to speak backwards for the rest of that day. The counter-spell will only work if she deigns to use the correct rune. One hopes that Bathsheda has reconsidered my ability to translate runes in light of that display, but mostly I did it because it was funny.”

“And vengeful,” Severus notes, pleased. “The pun was most unnecessary, by the way.”

“Both the pun and the vengeance are merely pleasant bonuses.”

* * * *

“We missed you at the house this afternoon,” Sirius says the moment Remus answers his knock on the door. He can hear dogs barking several houses down, but otherwise the little Welsh village has that lovely, peaceful quiet that seems endemic to Wales. Godric’s Hollow is quiet and lovely, but it doesn’t have that easy sense of peace to it.

Any Scotsman who claims their village is peaceful is ignoring the entire history of Britain.

“Good evening to you, too, wanker,” Remus replies, opening the door so Sirius can come in. “Have a cuppa if you’re so inclined.”

“No thanks. What did you do all day?” Sirius asks, but he understands almost at once. The kitchen has been properly cleaned and restocked, though he suspects anything in the old Muggle-style refrigerator has been hit hard with Preservation Charms. “You went bloody shopping?”

Remus shrugs, pouring a cup of tea that Sirius recognizes as the one Remus prefers to sip at before dinner. “Nizar sent a Patronus that told me to bleed on the earth in home territory. This is the closest to home territory that I have, and it’s titled land, besides. I did so, and immediately felt a hell of a lot better. Not perfect, and I’m still missing at least three-quarters of Great Britain in my head, but…”

“That’s excellent. Where is Mrs. Pryce?”
Remus lifts his teacup after tapping it with his finger to cool it down a bit. “Sulking, most likely. We disagreed over the house-cleaning that Rubinnie and Choppy were rabid about performing. Then we disagreed over some of the kitchen restocking. She wanted things her way, and I wanted to be able to eat what I bought, especially as she’s too dead to eat any of it!” he shouts in the direction of the hall. A muffled, indignant snort comes from behind a closed bedroom door, but that’s the height of Eglantine’s rebuttal. “The elves left around evening when I assured them I was capable of Apparating back to London on my own. How was your afternoon?”

“Oh, well.” Sirius waits until Remus takes a drink. “My brother’s not dead.”

Remus spews tea all over the kitchen table. “That’s a dirty—” His eyes widen when Sirius doesn’t smile. “You’re not joking, are you?”

“Not a bit. Oh, and there are two more people in the house who also are not dead. They’re married with children. Are you going to sleep here tonight, or would you like introductions? My guests are undecided on if they’re going to out themselves tomorrow morning during the Order meeting, but if they do, I want to leave the rest of the Order reeling, not the tetchy werewolf.”

Remus waves his wand to clean up the mess of spilt tea. “Yes, that’s definitely a good idea, though I’ll admit to being far less tetchy than I was. The full moon is on Wednesday, and I think the wolf is helping, which I’m really not used to. It’s just…after I bled on my own ground, I no longer wanted to gnaw people’s heads off.”

Sirius doesn’t bother to hide his relief. “That’s excellent.” He is used to normal-levels of cranky werewolf. What came after Riddle’s magical bullshit was not fun at all. “By the way: Teresa Bones and Caradoc Dearborn.”

Remus stares at him. “Caradoc.” He gives up on the tea and Banishes what’s left in the teacup. “My God. James would be so happy to know that.”

Sirius nods, saddened. “Yeah.” His spouse had always blamed himself, claiming maybe if they hadn’t separated the way they did after that fateful late night meeting, then maybe Caradoc wouldn’t have died.

He feels a moment of intense bitterness that Caradoc is still alive while James and Lily are dead, and forces himself to let it go. Any of them returning from the bloody grave is worth it. “Come on, mate. Tonks is probably eager to introduce you to her godmother. I’d bloody well forgotten that Andromeda and Teresa had traded off on that role for each other’s kids.”

Remus smiles. “Tonks must be thrilled.”

“Try boggled,” Sirius corrects, grinning. “But things will work out all right.”

“You’re still boggled.” Remus grabs his jacket from the peg next to the kitchen door that leads into the rear garden. Sirius didn’t look at it yesterday, but it’s no doubt as pristine as the front.

“I’m so boggled that I’m surviving on Calming Draughts,” Sirius admits. “But he’s alive, Remus. I just…I’m glad Regulus got another chance.”

“Yeah.” Remus rests his hand on Sirius’s arm. The heat of his grip soaks through Sirius’s robes at once, like it always has. “So am I.”
Theft of a Thief

Chapter Summary

Plans go awry.

Chapter Notes

Double-length chapter to make up for the gap of me being unable to write as I try to get through the medical bullshit. Hasn't been beta'd, as is usual of late, so any spectacularly bad typos are mine. <3

(If they screw with my new medication next week, I will scream. I'm only just now starting to adjust to this in the first place.)

Tonks doesn’t really blame the others when they scarper off upstairs. Even after story time, she suspects she’s had the least upheaval in her day—especially if that ancient Veela that Nizar mentioned is the one Tonks is thinking of.

Bloody hell, she hasn’t even seen this morning’s paper. That could have done a number on them, too. Mum is usually good about handing it to her in the mornings. “So, did anything terrible happen that you wouldn’t show me the Prophet this morning?”

Andromeda turns away from her quiet examination of the Bones family. “Karkaroff was tortured to death by the Dark Lord’s followers. Otherwise, nothing has changed. They have yet to report on the Muggle fatalities, but I’m not certain why.”

“Because it’s the bloody Prophet, and they’re accustomed to being useless.” Sirius points at Tonks before leaving the parlor. “Sleeping is healing, cousin. Go to bed!” Tonks rolls her eyes at him as he heads out, but she plans on doing exactly that. No reason not to, even if it doesn’t feel like she’s riding the ragged edge of sudden, disastrous nap any longer.

“I—wait a moment, please,” Teresa requests, which has Tonks turning in place to face the sofa again. Her godmother—she has a godmother, by Merlin!—looks a bit nervous. “You brought the subject up right at the start, so it would be rude of me to exclude you.”

“I don’t mind sticking around. Exclude me from what?” Tonks asks.


“Not a problem, love. Right, you two!” Caradoc claps his hands once, gaining Harriet and Lysander’s attention. Tonks bites her lip against the immediate, soppy response, and reminds her nutter hormones that she is twenty-three years old. It’s far too early for babies. She made full Auror in 1994, almost two years ago now, but she wants an established career under her belt before she buggers off on any sort of maternity leave.
The moment Caradoc is off with the rug rats, Teresa looks to Andromeda. “Sit down, please? It will make me feel less awkward.”

Mum gives Tonks an unreadable expression before she crosses the room and sits daintily down on the sofa next to Teresa. “Unless you’re about to ask me to assassinate someone, you’ve nothing to be frightened of.”

“I can be as nervous as I like, thank you,” Teresa retorts, and Tonks marvels at the sudden, blatant return of a Midlands Pure-blood accent. Apparently, all it took was sitting down with Andromeda face-to-face. “It’s…Lysander and Harriet have one godfather apiece. It didn’t seem fair to leave poor Rob dealing with both of them, so he has Harriet, and Jasper has Lysander—which is for the best, really. What my children lack is a godmother…for what I would hope are obvious reasons.”

Tonks has the delight of seeing her mother struck speechless for the second time in a single day. “You mean, you would still want—”

Teresa reaches out and rests her fingers atop Andromeda’s hand. “Darling, just because the past did not work out to our expectations does not mean I’ve lost faith that we made excellent decisions regarding our children.”

Andromeda blinks a few times. “Yes, but that was before you told me that you named Regulus as one of your children’s godfathers!”

“Oh, I am entirely free of guilt in that matter. Once Karl realized I still wished you to be their godmother, he claimed the right to name their godfather…well, godfathers,” Teresa says wryly. “You don’t mind, do you, Andromeda? I know that they’re quite a bit older now, but it is your name on the paperwork—”

Andromeda leaps forward and captures Teresa in a hug. “To have my dearest friend back, and know that she still trusts me with her children? I would be utterly foolish to deny you!”

Tonks grins, offers Teresa a discrete thumbs-up, and slips out of the room. Her mum and her godmother can be soft together without Tonks lurking about to trip over the furniture.

*          *          *          *

Being home again is odd, and not only because Regulus expected to die before seeing Twelve Grimmauld Place again as himself. He saw it while wearing someone else’s appearance several times, most notably when Mister Roderick Boyle bloody well clubbed him across the shins for sticking to character and trying to nick the silver.

As if the family silver would have let anyone but a true Black make off with it, anyway.

Come to think of it, Regulus probably shouldn’t tell Boyle about that. Boyle seems a decent bloke and good at his job; it would be a shame if he off and quit for thinking Sirius would sack him for striking the Magical Duke over London’s younger brother with a cricket bat.

The other difficulty is that every time Regulus turns a corner, he expects to find dull, dark, filthy dinge. Instead, the bright wallpaper, clean rugs, and polished wood continually surprise him. He did all right on the first storey, but by the time he makes it to the third storey, Regulus is starting to freak out. It feels more and more like he’s in the wrong bloody house.
The fourth storey, his goal, is also foreign territory, what with it being clean and brightly lit thanks to the skylight right over his head. Regulus knows his brother has a Geomancy mastery, but Regulus knows mathematics, and the maths all say No to that bit of bent space. It would be easier for him to take if it was a magical skylight, but it’s the real bloody thing, and Sirius told him the attic is still up there.

Again: odd.

The nameplates are still on their doors, which seems a strange thing to keep. Regulus tests out the biting doorknob on Sirius’s room and doesn’t get zapped by cranky magic, so he opens the door.

*At least this tells me you decided to grow up a bit,* Regulus thinks in amusement. The room is no longer done up in screaming I-Belong-In-Gryffindor scarlet and gold, and the pinups of girls in bikinis, both magical and not, have been removed from the walls. It’s a very somber space, decorated in deep mauve with dark wood and silver edging, but Regulus can’t really blame him for that.

What startles him are the two portraits on the walls. “Where the hell did you guys come from?”

Lily Evans and James Potter grin at him from their respective frames, hung next to each other but opposite Sirius’s canopy bed. If Regulus is remembering things from 1978 correctly, these portraits were painted right after the people in question graduated from Hogwarts.

“We used to live in Sirius’s apartment, before…well…” James trails off, looking unhappy.

“Before the Ministry decided to be stupid shits,” Lily finishes bluntly. “Remus came in and rescued us, along with a bunch of other things, when he heard about the arrest—though he hadn’t yet heard about the why. We tried to tell him afterwards that Sirius didn’t do it, but there was no convincing him.”

“No when we couldn’t tell him who the Secret Keeper really was,” James continues. “Sirius never told us, so we didn’t know. Poor Mooney just…he put us in storage with everything else and then did what Mooney does best.”


“Thank you. Am I going to find random portraits in my old bedroom?” Regulus asks.

“You don’t have any portraits in there at all.”

Regulus rolls his eyes at James Potter’s sulking and goes to take a look for himself. The door pushes open on hinges he spelled silent the moment he had a wand to do it with.

Then he stands in the doorway like a brainless lump, because what the bloody hell did he just walk in to?

He sneezes four times and then digs through his pockets for a handkerchief. Dust is thick in the air, along with the smell of a room that’s been closed up for far too long.

Everything is exactly the way Regulus left it. Every. Single. Thing.

Regulus was just as bad about the abundance of Slytherin green and silver—he had no taste as a teenager and readily admits it—but he didn’t really remember it being such a brick to the face before.

“You didn’t change anything?” he asks Sirius when his brother comes up the stairs about five minutes later.
“No. Why would I have?” Sirius asks in confusion. “I thought you were dead. I’d rather have remembered you, not a fucking empty room.”

“Okay, I’ll accept that, but…” Regulus glances around his old bedroom again. “You couldn’t have bloody well cleaned it?” he asks plaintively.

Sirius shakes his head. “It wouldn’t have smelled like you anymore. I didn’t want to lose that, too.”

“Sirius. All anyone coming into this room can smell is dust.”

Regulus’s brother snorts in amusement before shifting into a black Newfoundland. He immediately hops up onto Regulus’s bed, raising a great cloud of dust. He sits down, wagging his tail, and gives Regulus an expectant look.

Regulus feels like someone might have stabbed him in the chest recently. “You’ve slept in here?” he chokes out.

“Woof,” agrees the dog.

“Oh.” Regulus sits down on the bed, finding telltale bits of dog hair attached to the green duvet. “I’d have thought you’d have…you know. Gotten rid of the baby Death Eater’s existence.”

Sirius gives him a distinctly unimpressed stare before sprawling across Regulus’s lap in a clear demand for ear scratchings. “Woof,” he repeats. Odd how that sounds remarkably like, You are a dumb shit.

Regulus swallows hard and scratches his stupid brother’s ears. “All right. But now that I’m not dead, we’re going to clean this room. I’ll roll around on the bed afterwards if you want, but the décor and the dust have seriously got to go.”

Sirius thumps his tail in approval of the awful pun. Regulus blames their horrific genetic allotment for his brother’s awful sense of humor. He blames the dust for the moisture on his face.

No wonder his brother switched to his Animagus form. Dogs don’t cry.

* * * *

They’re awoken for dinner promptly at six, disrupting a nap that Severus had found pleasant. He normally doesn’t choose to nap at all, but he’s known for most of his life that sleep is one of the fastest ways for magical wounds to heal.

Sitting in the basement kitchen of Twelve Grimmauld Place with Caradoc, Teresa Bones, Harriet and Lysander, Lupin and Nymphadora, Black and Regulus, Nizar, Salazar, and Minerva is bloody odd. It isn’t even the fact that three of them are alive after long being thought dead; Severus has always found these sorts of social situations to be truly fucking awkward. Fortunately, no one seems to expect anything of him outside of consuming the meal, and Severus is grateful to be allowed his silence.

Regulus and Black are bickering, but it’s even-tempered, the sort of back-and-forth that Severus has come to expect from Salazar and Nizar. That will take some getting used to; it’s yet another sign that Sirius Black is maturing.
Pigs should be flying throughout London right now. It's mildly disappointing that they aren’t.

It’s frustrating that Severus wants to return to bed immediately after dinner. Fortunately, Nizar feels the same way, as do the other war mages. Lupin was the most energetic of all of them upon his return from Wales, and even he seems ready to faceplant into the pudding.

“Dreamless Sleep?” Nizar asks of the phial Severus gives him after they return to their chosen guest room.

“I think tonight it would be a wise idea. It’s not brewed to its typical strength; I dislike struggling to wake if something unexpected happens.”

Nizar uncaps the phial but doesn’t yet swallow the potion. “You think this is important.”

Severus hesitates. “I know you don’t prefer any sort of sleeping potions…but yes. I do.”

“Because we should be as recovered as it is possible to be, even if our sense of the land isn’t restored with the same speed,” Nizar says.

“I would think so, regardless,” Severus mutters. “I don’t want to admit that I feel it’s necessary because of Riddle.”

“That’s all right. I feel similarly—about all of it.” Nizar swallows the potion, places the empty container on the bed’s nightstand, and begins stripping off his clothes. “There is a full moon on Wednesday.”

Severus consults his inner calendar and realizes he’d forgotten. Losing two days to Riddle’s attack has thrown his schedule into complete disarray. “If he’s swayed werewolves to his side, it would be an ideal day to carry out whatever it is he’s planned.”

“I’m going to sleep now, and I’m going to pretend that the last thing you said wasn’t frustrating.”

Kingsley arrives promptly at half-past six the next morning. Everyone in the house is awake except the children. It’s one of the few times in his life that Severus has ever been envious a bloody nine-year-old. He doesn’t even get out of bed this early for teaching.

A lack of spying has made him soft. He used to not care about sleep, or its lack. Now he just wants this Order meeting to be over and done with so he can go back to bed, even if that bed is the one upstairs in this hated house.

Black is present, acting as bleary-eyed host. Nymphadora and Lupin stepped out a few minutes before Kingsley’s arrival, off somewhere doing God knows what. Caradoc has the alertness of a morning person, the bastard. Regulus also looks far too pleased about being awake. At least Nizar, Minerva, and Salazar are sharing in Severus’s loathing of the early hour.

Teresa is the one who reads as neutral regarding the early hour, which makes Severus wonder if she slept at all. He is well aware of the fact that years of spying bring about paranoid insomnia, and she was performing that role for nearly eight years in the last war after losing her children, along with most of her family. Now she’s in the midst of another war against Voldemort, once again with two children to fear for.

Severus has never wanted to be a parent in his life, but given those circumstances, he wouldn’t fucking sleep, either.

Kingsley exchanges brief greetings with everyone except the recently un-deceased, though he eyes
Andromeda’s hair in silent curiosity. To Regulus, he offers a firm handshake and gratitude that Regulus was insane enough to retrieve the Horcrux Locket from an Inferi-infested trap. Teresa is granted a formal bow, as well as an offer of escort to the Ministry—or to the Bones cottage—whenever she is ready to see Madam Bones again.

Caradoc is the one that Kingsley hugs, which is odd. Kingsley is not normally so prone to public displays. “My tutor,” he says with a smile.

Ah. That is one detail regarding the first war Severus had forgotten. To be fair, his priorities had been limited to what was useful to Voldemort, of value to Dumbledore, or helpful in keeping himself from dying.

“My exceptionally ambitious protégé,” Caradoc counters, grinning. “Head of the M.L.E. You should have been in Slytherin.”

“I’m quite the Ravenclaw, thank you,” Kingsley replies. “However, time is short; on to unwanted business. I need to know now if the three of you are going to reintroduce yourselves to Wizarding Britain during this morning’s meeting.”

Teresa and Caradoc exchange glances that speak well of how long they’ve been together as a couple. The shared look they then grant Regulus does well to remind Severus how many years these three have been working towards the same goal.

“You recall that another member of the Underground was due to present themselves today using cautious means,” Regulus says to Kingsley.

Kingsley nods. “Go on.”

“They want to see how the Order reacts to her,” Regulus says. “Gwen is aware of the fact that we’re basically using her as a lab rat, but she doesn’t mind. She’ll be right next to Salazar, and if anyone tries to throw a hex at a pregnant woman, they may not live long enough to regret it.”

“Tell me who she’ll be disguised as before the reveal,” Kingsley requests. “I can at least be ready to defend a member of the Underground if the others prove to be…twitchy.”

“Twitchy.” Regulus rolls his eyes. “That’s what we’re worried about. Four miracles in one day might be a bit much for that lot. We survived the last war, Auror Shacklebolt, and we’d like to continue with that surviving, thank you.”

“Kingsley, please,” Kingsley insists. “Unless you wish for me to refer to you properly as Lord Regulus?”

Regulus looks disturbed in response. “God, please don’t. My brother being a magical duke is odd enough.”

“Mundungus Fletcher,” Salazar says to answer Kingsley’s question. “Polyjuice only creates a change that is skin-deep, or Gwen wouldn’t be able to use it. The pregnancy,” he adds, when Kingsley looks politely confused. “That would be the very reason why she’s stepping forward today. Gwen doesn’t wish to risk the baby with further spying, not when she and her wife worked so hard to manage a pregnancy in the first place.”

Kingsley frowns. “Your group uses Fletcher quite often. Where is he when you do so?”

“Mundungus Fletcher is in the same place he’s been residing since 1991,” Salazar answers, but shakes his head when Kingsley opens his mouth to speak. “No, we didn’t have a whit to do with it,
but I’d rather not repeat the story twice. Ask on his fate again when it’s the whole of the Order, not just us.”

“I’ll do that, then,” Kingsley agrees. “Caradoc, Teresa: are you going to be observing the Order meeting?”

They shake their heads. “We’ll see it in a Pensieve later if anything comes up that we need to know about beyond a basic report,” Teresa says. “Oh, and please do remember that we’re Trinity and Karl if there is need to mention now-known members of the Underground.”

“Very well,” Kingsley agrees, and turns to Regulus. “You, however, don’t have a choice. Not only do I have four Aurors who don’t have the Occlumency barriers capable of withstanding an interrogation from You-Know-Who, your presence at Barnard Park yesterday will no doubt have been reported by that escaped Death Eater.”

“I haven’t heard back yet by the one meant to be overnighting in Twit Riddle’s court, but I would be surprised if it was not spoken of,” Salazar says. “More so than that, I’d be unnerved. That isn’t the sort of secret that keeps very well, not unless there are worse things lurking behind it.”

“Exactly so, though you’ll excuse me if I hope for blatant gossip,” Kingsley responds in a dry voice. “How is your Occlumency then, Regulus?”

“I’ve a Mind Magic Mastery,” Regulus answers. “It might be something the Auror program should push for.”

“They really should,” Black says. “Alastor was so bloody frustrated when he was checking out his new recruits the summer of 1978. There were a grand total of three of us who could keep out a basic Legilimency casting. I was the only one of the three that could hold off someone casting it with a wand.”

“It’s one of the changes I’ve been pushing for, yes.” Kingsley’s smile is too grim to be happy. “Madam Bones agrees with me, as does Alastor. Thanks to a lack of teachers, we’re about a month shy of beginning that training. I don’t like that it took Rufus’s death to clear the path, either.”

“Scrimgeour was against Mind Magic?” Andromeda asks, her expression twisted in distasteful disbelief.

Kingsley sighs. “The old bastard always claimed that he’d survived two magical wars just fine with only basic Occlumency to keep out the riffraff, so why would anyone else need that sort of thing?”

Severus bares his teeth. Idiot.

Nizar mirrors his thoughts aloud. “Stupid dead idiot.”

Regulus smirks. “He was merely raised by the wrong sort, whereas Sirius and I benefited from the Black family paranoia. It’s good to know Occlumency when they really are out to get you.”

“Wand-casted Mind Magic defence, but no mastery?” Salazar asks Black, frowning.

Black rolls his eyes. “Blacks weren’t fond of teaching Legilimency to their children, Salazar. We might’ve wised up enough to revolt if we knew exactly what the family thought of us. I’m just glad I won’t have to worry about hiding my thoughts about Regulus. I know I can keep a Death Eater out, but not the Lord Twit.”

*But what about Dumbledore?* Severus wonders. He glances across the room and knows that Salazar
is thinking the same.

Salazar stands up and stretches until his spine cracks. “Do you mind if I have a look, Sirius? At this stage in the game, certainty is important.”

Black shrugs. “Knock yourself out—not literally, I hope. What do you need to do?”

“I won’t be trying to pry. I just want to look at your shielding. Might feel a bit off if I nudge at something.” When Black nods, Salazar meets Black’s gaze, his eyes slightly unfocused as he looks beyond the physical. Severus’s eyes have never done the same, which he prefers; the trait has unnerved many of his Occlumency victims into all but shoving the truth into his head before he can begin to dig for it.

“Your first layer is very much the razor wire of one who wishes to keep everyone else out,” Salazar comments after a moment. “It would be difficult for your average bit of offensive Mind Magic to gain entry—what the bloody hell, Sirius Black?”

Black rubs at his forehead and shakes off the influence of being read by Salazar. “What? I didn’t do anything!”

Salazar stares at him. “Didn’t do—where is your second layer of shielding? I know the family taught it, as Regulus already had it when we met!”

Black looks puzzled. “Second layer? What’s a second layer?”

Severus drops his face into his hands, listening to Nizar curse under his breath. Bloody hell, it’s a minor miracle that Dumbledore doesn’t already know everything!

“Fucking Dementors!” Regulus shouts. “Fucking memory-eating incorporeal bastards!” Caradoc sighs and shoves Regulus down into a chair, silently signaling for him to calm down.

Black shoves his hair back from his face. “I’m sorry, that’s just—it’s gone. I don’t remember a damned thing about secondary layers. I’ll get right on fixing that, but knowing what the hell I’m meant to be doing would be nice.”

“Whatever you build should be deadlier than the first layer—as impassible as you can make it,” Nizar says. “Razor wire is a threat. What should lie beyond that is the promise.”

“A promise, huh? What did you use as your second layer, Nizar?” Black asks.

Nizar smiles. “A basilisk's unlidded stare. It's effective.”

Black stares at him for a moment. “Nizar, you're fucking mental.”

“I hear that quite often, yes.” Nizar tilts his head to one side. “If you can manage it without panicking, use a Dementor as your second layer. The sort of Dementor that really could steal the soul of someone trying to invade your thoughts.”

“Because Occlumency is about belief.” Black shivers. “Yes, fine. I’ll give it a try, but after this meeting. I’d like to limit the amount of laundry I’m handing off the Frances.”

“Leaving that unpleasant idea aside, Regulus? How do you want to handle the meeting?” Teresa asks.

“I’m bound to this place by blood,” Regulus says. “I’ll be hiding in a corner of the kitchen during the
first part of the meeting. The house won’t let anyone see me if I don’t want to be seen. It was a useful trick to use when avoiding Aunt Cassiopeia. She was a bit…off.”

“That’s like saying Roquefort’s blue cheese only has a smidge of mold,” Nizar retorts.

Salazar regards Regulus. “Revealing yourself after Gwen, then?”

Regulus nods. “It will give the paranoid twits two different targets, and no one will know where to point a wand first. The more distractions available, the greater chance we have of getting through the morning with no one hexed into oblivion.”

By the time they make it down to the kitchen, it’s nearly seven. Lupin and Nymphadora are still missing, they haven’t had breakfast, Nizar is barely holding himself upright, and Severus wants to kill something.

“Fuck all of this,” Lupin announces as he comes downstairs, carrying a tray laden with paper-sleeved disposable coffee cups. He’s followed by Nymphadora, who is sensibly floating her acquisitions along instead of carrying them. “We went out to fetch coffee and pastries. Any takers?”

“Oh dear Lord, yes please,” Minerva requests at once. “What sort of pastries?”

“Sweets are in here,” Nymphadora puts her large box down on the table. “Eccles cakes with cheese. We also picked up a few raspberry scones and chelsea buns. This box has a bit less sugar in it—lardy cake, toasted currant bread, and flapjacks. They even had bloody Welsh cakes that Remus swears taste just like they’re meant to, so the corner shop must have picked up a Welsh chef in the past month.”

“And those of us who are on time for this meeting have dibs,” Bill says cheerfully, looking far too awake, alert, and healthy. Severus enjoys a quiet moment of hatred for the Prewett-Weasley constitution.

“Excellent point. Sirius, where’s the milk?” Emmaline asks.

“Cold store,” Black says. “Sugar is on the counter next to it. We’re out of honey, but Frances is picking some up at the market right about now.”

Salazar picks up a coffee from the tray. “Do you not know how to purchase a coffee maker?”

“It’s more like the poor things die terrible deaths within about a day of living here, and none of us can make proper coffee from a press to save our lives,” Lupin replies.

Severus selects one of the coffees, and a bit of currant bread that looks the least burnt. Sometimes bakers simply don’t understand the meaning of toasted. At least the coffee smells decent.

Black glances at Nizar and regards him in concern. “What’s wrong with you? You didn’t look nearly this exhausted upstairs earlier.”

Nizar gives Black a bleary look. “A bunch of idiot fucking Death Eaters tried to attack Hogsmeade in the middle of the night, and my connection to the Brae lands made certain I was aware of it. I Apparated there in response, but they ran off instead of lingering long enough to die properly.”

Severus feels a jolt of unwanted, unnecessary panic as he glares at Nizar. “Why didn’t you mention that before now?”

“When, and why?” Nizar reaches for one of the coffees with a disappointed look on his face. “You
slept through my departure and return, and that included me falling on the rug when I got back. Besides, Aberforth assisted with the actual dispatching—"

“I really wouldn’t call it much of an assist,” Aberforth interjects while selecting a scone. “Enough of us in Hogsmeade flooded the streets with wands that it made the bastards think twice about trying their nonsense. A few seconds of posturing later, and the lot of them buggered off.”

“Details,” Nizar mutters.

Severus spends a fascinating two minutes watching the man try to remember how to remove a plastic lid from a paper cup. That would explain his temper. It’s possibly miraculous that Nizar got dressed this morning without assistance.

“Why are you staring at me?” Nizar asks in annoyance.

“Because it’s cold brew coffee.” When Lupin said he had coffee, he didn’t mention that he’d gone to the trouble of finding excellent coffee. Severus will privately admit that it’s a—a kind gesture.

Why does his life have to involve thinking of a Marauder in any sort of polite terms at all?

“Why didn’t they have tea?” Nizar asks.

Lupin smiles. “It’s a coffee shop, Nizar. Tea is their natural enemy. Try it without milk and sugar first.”

Nizar gives Lupin a suspicious look, but finally succeeds in taking off the lid to try a sip. Then he looks up in confusion. “It doesn’t taste like compost. Why?”

“Because it’s cold-brewed,” Severus repeats, amused.

“Steam-brewed coffee does not taste like compost unless it is terrible coffee!” Salazar protests.

Nizar ignores his brother. “Different chemical reactions to temperature. Excellent. I can work with this.” He still reaches for the sugar when Emmaline brings it to the table for easy reach, along with a number of spoons.

Ten minutes after seven o’clock, the coffee has been obliterated, as have most of the pastries. Except for three members, everyone in the Order (including the new Aurors and other volunteers) is present, including Rubeus Hagrid and Olympe Maxine. They’re both staying in a corner of the room and trying to be as unobtrusive as is possible for a pair of half-giants. Somewhere on the opposite side of the room, Regulus Black is doing the same.

At least half of the Order makes a fuss over Andromeda’s white hair the moment they catch sight of it. Severus rolls his eyes and wonders if anyone is capable of making a basic observation without losing their fucking minds. She changed her hair; she did not become a Merperson.

Despite Kingsley’s earlier arrival, he, Moody, and Dumbledore are late. It would be irritating if it was only Dumbledore, but the Head of the M.L.E. and Head Auror’s tardiness suggests they’re about to receive yet more unfortunate news.

Severus passes the time by keeping an eye on “Mundungus Fletcher.” As Salazar told them would happen, Fletcher is sitting in the chair nearest to Salazar. His eyes are darting around more than usual, and he declined all offers of food and drink. He also has a nervous tic of tapping his finger on the tabletop. It would be odd behavior if Fletcher hadn’t already been known to act in exactly that fashion if he’d just stolen something he truly should not have touched.
What might drive Severus to distraction is the intense feeling that it isn’t Gwen seated next to Salazar at all. Based on some of Salazar’s brief glances, Severus knows the other man is aware of the change. However, if the Underground had to make unexpected changes to their plan, it isn’t something they can discuss while in the midst of nearly every member of the Order of the Phoenix.

Minerva is seated at Salazar’s opposite side. She is keeping her hands gently clasped together on the table, but her right hand is always covering her left. She cast an Invisibility Charm on the ring for the duration of the meeting, if only so no one is distracted by asking her about it. Filius is conspicuous by his absence, but Poppy informed them all that he only just awoke with true coherency yesterday evening. She’s concerned that they’ll need a Charms teacher to act in Filius’s stead for the rest of the school term, and so is Filius. The very fact that Filius admitted to it is alarming—Filius and Severus both have a severe loathing of failing to teach their own classes—but Poppy insists Filius will be fine within a few months.

Severus grinds his teeth. There is only one man he knows of that is qualified to take the post for Charms. Aside from Severus’s intense dislike of Lupin, the resulting public uproar will be irritating to deal with.

Then again, the man is now a titled noble and a war mage. That makes his chances of successfully landing another Hogwarts posting higher than Severus would prefer.

Goddammit, Hogwarts needs a competent Charms teacher. Lupin has a Charms mastery. Severus will learn to cope with a fucking werewolf in the castle again, especially one that is using a more effective potion that renders him incapable of transmitting the lycanthropy curse.

Severus distracts himself from concerns about werewolves and “Fletcher” by studying the Weasleys. Arthur was the last arrival of that set, citing the continuing chaos in the Ministry as they continue to prepare for and react to Voldemort’s attacks. Charlie congratulated his brother and his brother’s fiancée on becoming war mages, told them they were insane, and said it was about time Bill admitted to it. Fleur, at least, had already admitted it by entering the Triwizard Tournament the previous year.

Molly still has issues with her eldest son’s choice of spouse. She isn’t as angry about it as she was when the engagement was first announced, but her irritation continues. Severus would find that hilarious if it were a more civilized time of day. Molly is not nearly as subtle about her dislike as she thinks she is, and Miss Delacour is not nearly as oblivious of those hostile feelings as she pretends to be. Molly’s temper is slow to cool, but when it does, Miss Delacour will be smothered in motherly Weasley affection to such an extent that she might wish for a return to hostilities.

“My apologies for our tardy arrival, but there was a sudden discovery that required our immediate attention,” Dumbledore says as he enters the kitchen, Kingsley striding in just behind him. Moody is the last, cursing under his breath as he navigates the steep basement stairs.

Dumbledore doesn’t sit as he usually does, but stands at the opposite end of the table. “I will give you the lesser of the ill news first.”

“Oh, that sounds promising,” Ted murmurs. Andromeda glances at her husband with a faint nod of agreement.

Kingsley looks far too grim for what Dumbledore has dubbed “lesser” ill news. “We now know that Tom didn’t release all of his followers from Azkaban in one fell swoop on the Ides of March. He had already been retrieving them, one individual at a time.”

“Bugger,” Nymphadora murmurs while the other Order members exchange concerned looks. “How?”
“We believe that Tom was visiting Azkaban often, beginning this past autumn after his resurrection,” Dumbledore says. “With each visit, he swayed more and more of the Dementors to his cause. To collect certain of his followers without anyone being the wiser, he also convinced the Dementors to impersonate the missing prisoners inside their cells.”

Severus scowls and ignores the shocked mutterings that break out. “How?” Only Salazar and Nizar look unsurprised, but Severus and Nizar had a very recent, informative encounter with a bloody Dementor.

“They are minor shapeshifters because of the nature of their form,” Dumbledore answers.

Kingsley picks up the thread, to Dumbledore’s potential irritation. “Unfortunately, no one who worked on the island paid much attention to the prisoners of Azkaban unless they were required to retrieve a body. The prisoners rarely moved, lived in the shadows, and were dressed in grey uniforms. All of these things worked very well in You-Know-Who’s favor. When he emptied Azkaban of all living beings, Riddle did so with the assistance of those he had already rescued. Unfortunately, that same mass escape, and the Dementor’s ploy, means that we do not know who his assistants were. Only two of the premature escapees were identified.”

Andromeda purses her lips. “Then we now know how the Lestrange brothers escaped prison to be present for the incident in the Department of Mysteries last December. Their release was a test to see if it could be done, and to find out if their absence would be noticed.”

“We believe so, yes,” Kingsley agrees. “I suspect one of the guards for the high-security prisoners, such as the Lestranges, was allied to You-Know-Who. When the Lestranges were recaptured that day, there was no mention of their cells being occupied by Dementors. If that truth was revealed, Cornelius Fudge buried it, just as he buried many inconvenient truths before resigning from office.”

“And we still have no leads on the Death Eaters who escaped Azkaban,” Alastor growls. “Except for the two we recaptured in Diagon Alley, they’ve been wily bastards. They attack and they vanish.”

“We might not know anything of them, but…unfortunately, we do know what became of those in Azkaban who were not You-Know-Who’s followers.” Kingsley lowers his head. “Their bodies were found yesterday morning. It’s why I called for this meeting.”

“Infieri?” Auror Urquhart asks in a faint voice.

“Unfortunately, yes. Some did suffer that fate.” Dumbledore’s eyes are steady, without a hint of that blasted twinkling, but Severus has spent years reading Dumbledore’s body language. He is genuinely unhappy, and angry, that Voldemort has already made sport of his first collection of prisoners.

*Chess pieces or empathy, Severus thinks sourly. Please make up your fucking mind between the two options so that my life will be less complicated.*

“What else?” Salazar asks, staring at Kingsley. “There is something you’ve yet to mention.”

Kingsley briefly covers his eyes with one hand before giving Nizar an apologetic look. “Victoria Bluebell was among the victims. She was not made to be an Infieri. She was tortured to death, most likely for refusing to follow You-Know-Who.”

Seventeen-year-olds make mistakes. Victoria Bluebell’s second, fatal mistake was in choosing to defy Voldemort at once, rather than attempt to bide her time and escape. Dammit.
Severus glances over at Nizar. His eyes are shut, his head bowed in silence, but his fingernails are digging into the table and starting to carve noticeable grooves. That is going to be an explosion later, but he has no idea what sort.

“Two of the prisoners that Fudge locked away were not with the dead, and we suspect that they willingly joined You-Know-Who,” Kingsley continues. “The M.L.E. is still cleaning up the mess caused by the Inferi, which has necessitated the use of the Obliviator squads. You-Know-Who released them near a village in Wales last night. Fortunately for us, a member of the British armed forces was stationed there as a representative of Hadrian’s Wall. He called in a warning, which was passed on to the Ministry. He also discovered that while Muggle guns might not stop an Inferi, it certainly slows them down.”

“That’s useful information to gain.” Nizar lifts his head and turns to Salazar. “Hermano.” The rest of what he says is in Parseltongue.

Salazar’s eyes narrow as he listens, then replies. Nizar hisses again, Parseltongue accompanied by a nod. Then Salazar becomes a blur of sudden motion that ends with him pinning Mundungus Fletcher to the nearest wall.

“What the hell—!” Diggle begins to shout, but is silenced by a glare from Nizar.

“Be. Quiet,” Nizar orders, his eyes lit by sparks of silver. Severus glances at Minerva, then Kingsley and Black. All of them are staring with flint-eyed anger at the tableau. Something has gone wrong, and they’re the only ones who know exactly how bad it must be.

Salazar digs the tip of his cherrywood wand into the Polyjuiced Fletcher’s throat. “Where is she?” he asks with a charming smile. “Do please answer me, or you will discover the joys of viewing your own intestines coiled up on this floor. I’ve had the experience of it, myself. I don’t recommend it.”

“I don’t have any bloody idea what you’re on about!” Fletcher shouts, struggling in Salazar’s grasp. “Albus—”

Dumbledore’s gaze is razor sharp. “I would like it very much if someone would explain this.”

“Someone thought to spy on the Order in truth, rather than just my bit of eavesdropping, but they were quite stupid about it.” Salazar continues to smile at the false Fletcher. “You brought the Dark Mark, a complicated bit of blood magic, into a room occupied by a Blood Mage who can sniff out such things. It did take Nizar a few minutes to notice that your Mark lacked certain alterations, but to be fair to my brother, he’s had quite the week.”

Moody stands and lifts his wand. “Now that is proper vigilance.” Severus stands as well, and within moments, the entire Order is on their feet. Not everyone raises a wand, but there are enough of them that the lack won’t matter. “I wonder which Death Eater was fool enough to enter this house?”

Severus looks at Dumbledore, but his eyes flicker over to Kingsley briefly, letting the man know he is being included in this request. “May I?” he asks, his tone just shy of snide.

Dumbledore frowns before nodding. “I would like to know his identity. Nothing irreparable, please.”

Severus raises his wand and blasts his way through those shields with vicious pleasure. That gains
him much better results, and the telltale signs of a mind that’s been recently Obliviated of certain memories. The Obliviator covered their tracks well; the memories that were there have been tied to utterly mundane events, including Miss Blishwick’s last birthday celebration. That sort of misdirection doesn’t stop him from identifying their interloper.

Severus backs out quickly; being in that mind is like marinating in wastewater. “Allan Blishwick.”

“Oh, him.” Salazar shakes his head. “You must have lost favor with your beloved Dark Lord over the years if you’ve been reduced to a Polyjuiced spy, Allan Blishwick. You once stood in Riddle’s innermost circle. Did he not appreciate your lack of imprisonment after the last war ended?”

Blishwick snarls at Salazar. “It’s favor that I will regain! Thanks to me, that traitor bitch is dead already!”

“Oh, for your sake, I do hope you’re lying.” Salazar leans in close to the man, his eyes on fire with the emerald and silver flame of his magic. “Because if you speak the truth, you will not enjoy the brief remainder of your existence.”

Blishwick laughs. “Your threats are empty!” he declares, making it obvious that he decided stupidity was the answer to his troubles.

Salazar’s eyes narrow. “One last chance. Where is she, and whose company will I find her in?”

Blishwick’s oozing, confident smile is the idiotic gesture of someone who hasn’t yet realized exactly how much danger they’re in. “I don’t know.”

“My threats are never empty…but perhaps it’s best that another make the point for me. I’m upset enough that I might slip and do something rash. Fortunately for you, there is someone in this room who is so much more frightening than I.” Salazar abruptly releases his prisoner. Blishwick starts to straighten and then freezes as he realizes that most of the wands in the kitchen are trained on him.

Salazar glances at his brother. “Nizar?”

Nizar walks over with a bright smile and clamps his hand down on Blishwick’s shoulder. “How are you with heights?”

“What?” Blishwick blurts in confusion—just before they both Disapparate.

Kingsley is the first to lower his wand. “Where did Nizar just take our…guest?”

Tonks is right on his verbal heels. “And how did Nizar Apparate out of here? There are bloody wards against that!”

Sirius rolls his eyes and sighs. “My house, my rules, my granted exceptions, Tonks. If you’d been paying attention instead of flirting with Remus, you’d already know that you can Apparate in and out of this house, too.”

Tonks blinks a few times and then blushes. “Oh. Right.”

“Our guest?” Arthur asks in pointed reminder.

“Oh, Nizar most likely went to dangle Blishwick over the side of a building.” Salazar leans back against the kitchen countertop and crosses his arms. “Fortunately, the traffic in London at this time of morning should mask the screaming.”
Lupin frowns. “If that’s all that Nizar is doing, why aren’t you doing it in his place?”

Salazar’s smile is touched with bitter humor. “Unless there is a sturdy building or a broom beneath me, I am not much fond of heights.”

Charlie interrupts whatever Dumbledore tries to say. “How many times have you fallen from deadly heights without the dying part, then?”

Salazar grimaces and doesn’t answer. Severus decides he doesn’t want to know.

“The Order of the Phoenix does not approve of torture,” Dumbledore finally manages to say, doing a very poor job of trying to mimic Aberforth’s impression of a thundercloud.

“Oh, but Legilimency without consent doesn’t qualify?” Salazar doesn’t hide the fact that he isn’t impressed with Dumbledore’s argument. “I’m a bit more concerned with finding her before Blishwick’s words are proven true.”

“I’ll overlook the dangling as long as Blishwick is returned in one piece,” Kingsley insists before Dumbledore can protest again. “Our concern is definitely for the living…though I will admit, arresting Blishwick and his accomplices would be one more bit of good news the Ministry can grant to Wizarding Britain.”

“Less so for Miss Blishwick,” Minerva murmurs, but Severus suspects her words are heard by very few. Bernicia Blishwick is already insufferable, and this will not improve her behavior. It makes Severus glad that Miss Blishwick is not one of his Slytherins.

“Who is it?” Molly asks, hands clasped to her breast. “Who’s in danger, Salazar?”

Moody nods in approval. “Aye, that bit’s important. If we already know who we’re searching for, we’ll be ready to move the moment your brother convinces that fool to open his useless mouth. Randall, Mirfield, you’re with me.”

Auror Mirfield doesn’t look happy about it. “Yes, sir.” Auror Randall just nods, his grip on his wand far too tight.

“I’ll go with you,” Lupin says, which immediately has Black, Tonks, and half the Weasleys protesting. Lupin rolls his eyes. “Stop yelling; I’m not daft. I’m doing better than the others, and Moody’s bunch might need the distraction of a war mage.”

“And mayhap a shield, too.” Rubeus steps forward, cracking his knuckles and grinning. “I can take the bike and meet you wherever these idiots are holed up.”

Madam Maxine lets out a cough that is probably meant to sound delicate. “You will not be doing so without me, Hagrid.”

“I’m in, too. Another distraction of a war mage,” Bill says. Molly glares at him at once, but Bill shakes his head. “Don’t even start, Mum. Lacking a bit of land awareness doesn’t stop me from being capable of aiming a wand.”

Weasleys, Prewetts, and werewolves. Severus takes a moment to loathe all of them. He isn’t capable of facing a battle yet, and he knows it. He’s certain the only reason Nizar managed it was because the Heights of Brae fed him the strength via the magical title.

In retrospect, he really should have been suspicious. Trying to wake Nizar this morning was like trying to rouse a boulder.
Salazar waits until the volunteers have sorted themselves. “Her name is currently Gwenneth Anna Brown. She was meant to be here today to give up on the spying bit for the Underground, as she’s pregnant with her first child. Her birth name was Guinevere Athena Greengrass.”

Severus is pleased that his suspicion was proven correct. The others just look entertainingly stunned.

“She is one of the Slytherins Nizar mentioned during that first week,” Minerva finally says. “The ones he thought capable of changing their minds about Riddle.”

“I remember her,” Emmaline says, beginning to frown. “She was the same year as Regulus Black and myself, right?”

“And she was supposed to have died in a Fiendfyre storm conjured by that damned idiot Allenford Selwyn,” Alastor adds, scowling. “It killed him and took out the entire village they were raiding that night. Eighteenth January, 1980.”

“How did Mrs. Greengrass-Macnair survive?” Dumbledore asks. Severus glances at him and thinks that Teresa and Caradoc had the right idea regarding their wait-and-see policy. He does not trust the expression on Dumbledore’s face. Regulus must have noticed, as well, or he would have announced himself already.

“She barely escaped the village after Selwyn cast the spell,” Salazar answers. “Unlike Selwyn, Gwen knew exactly what Fiendfyre could do. I found her as she was throwing her Death Eater’s mask and cloak into the flames—she’d realized with her mother’s death and her father’s cowardice that she didn’t want any part of a Death Eater’s life. Fortunately, I was in the company of another member of the Underground, someone she already had reason to trust, else she might simply have chosen to disappear entirely. And her name isn’t Macnair,” Salazar adds, annoyed. “That fool she was forced to wed died in the final days of 1979.”

Severus says what many others are too thoughtless—or too stunned—to say. “I have two Slytherins in my House who will be very glad to know their sister survived. Thank you.”

Salazar grants him a nod. “That they will, though I suggest that if Blishwick was correct, we not tell the Greengrass sisters. They have mourned a sister they’ve never known all their lives; I’ll not subject them to the cruelty of a second death.”

Nizar returns before anyone can say something stupid. He’s gripping his broom in one hand and holding up Polyjuiced Blishwick by the back of his robes. Severus notes that the ends of Nizar’s hair are frosted white, his skin reddened by freezing winds. Blishwick soiled himself, front and back, and has been expertly reduced to a pathetic, blubbering mess.

“What the bloody hell happened to him?” Lupin asks, staring at Nizar in shock.

“Well, Allan Blishwick here doesn’t really have a problem with heights.” Nizar grins. “Did you know the tops of those skyscraper buildings actually sway in the wind? There is one here in London that looks to be at least forty-seven storeys tall. It turns out that Blishwick didn’t believe me when I said we’d jump from that height. It only took about three seconds of falling for him to start screaming out everything I wanted to know.”

Auror Higgs gapes at Nizar in blank amazement. “You—you jumped off a forty-seven storey building? You just jumped?”

Nizar scowls and waves around the broomstick in his hand. “I’d like to introduce you to a fabulous invention from ancient times. We call it a broom.”
Salazar waits until Nizar drops the Death Eater to the floor. Blishwick lands with a wet-sounding thump and begins to weep like a tortured ghost. “Where, Nizar?”

“I don’t know who has her—that part was conveniently erased from his mind, but I do know where. They’re holding her in an abandoned tavern in Stratford, off Leytonstone Road, but I’m not certain of the exact location. Blishwick here doesn’t seem to understand the concept of numbered buildings.”

Moody spits on the floor. “That would be a trap, then.”

“One that we’ll be springing, thank you,” Salazar replies. “I’ll be going even if you do not.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Idiota, war mages still do not have authority to arrest people in Wizarding Britain!”

“Who said anything about arresting whoever I find?”

“You are definitely staying here, then,” Kingsley says, glaring at Salazar. “I can’t arrest pieces of Death Eaters for trial in a Ministry courtroom!”

“I know where that pub is.” Lupin strips off his jacket and begins rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. “That means I know how to surround it.” Tonks’s hair turns a faded mouse grey with silver edges after he speaks, quietly expressing her unhappiness that she isn’t capable of going with him.

Alastor nods at Kingsley, but gives Salazar a sly smile. “I’ll make certain at least one of them is still capable of being arrested.”

“Sirius, who else has an exception to the house’s anti-Apparition wards?” Bill asks.

“All of the war mages,” Sirius replies. “Thought it might be a sensible precaution. If you’re carrying someone else, you’ll be able to pass through the wards, but it might be a bit rough on your passenger.”

“I don’t mind a bit of rough travel.” Alastor stalks directly over to Lupin. “I’m with you. Bill, snag Mirfield. She’s quick in a pinch if we Apparate in right on top of a Death Eater. Randall, Apparate to that part of London the moment you’re out of this house. Hagrid, Madam Maxine, how soon can you join us?”

“Once we cast a good Disillusionment Charm, the flight shouldn’t be too bad on the bike,” Hagrid muses. “Twenty minutes or less.”

“Or,” Madam Maxine says, “we could take my method of travel.”

Hagrid blinks a few times before he beams at her. “We could do that, yeah. Five minutes, then, Alastor!”

“Excellent. We’ll have the perimeter clear by the time the rest of you arrive.” Alastor nods at Lupin. The werewolf grins back before they Disapparate. Bill offers his family a brief wave, squeezes his fiancée’s hand before releasing her, and then Disapparates with Mirfield. Randall immediately bolts for the stairs, clutching his wand like he wants to stab a Death Eater with it instead of hexing them. Despite their size, Madam Maxine and Rubeus are quick on their feet, and follow along just behind the Auror.

Nizar shrinks and pockets his broom before glancing down at the floor. “Blishwick’s Polyjuice is wearing off. Would anyone like to do the honors?”
“Happily,” Kingsley mutters. He draws his wand and casts *Incarcerous*, binding the shorter, squatter form of Allan Blishwick from shoulders to toes. “That will keep him restrained until I take him back to the Ministry. I’m hoping Alastor will bring me a collection Blishwick can be added to.”

“I’ll be leaving the moment we know that Gwen is safe.” Salazar’s fingers are tapping along his upper arm, but the glimmer in his eyes is of suppressed rage, not fear. “If one member of the Underground has been compromised, the others may all be in danger.”

That was a blatant vocal hint. Regulus will be on the move to warn the others, not lingering in the kitchen. Reintroducing him to Wizarding Britain will have to wait.

It isn’t Kingsley who asks about Mundungus Fletcher; Andromeda beats him to it. “What of Mundungus? I’m not fond of the odious man, but should we not be looking for him?”

“Fletcher?” Salazar shrugs his lack of concern. “That idiot drank himself to death late in 1991. It’s just as well you find out now. We were running out of the bastard’s hair.”

“He did what?” Black yells.

Severus glares at him. “Honestly, why are you surprised by that?”

“I’m not surprised,” Ted says dryly. “Fletcher was already in the midst of pickling himself back in 1981.”

Dumbledore’s voice is sharp with anger, no hint of the conciliatory leader left to him. “I’m not pleased by the idea that your Underground has been using a dead man’s identity to spy upon the Order for over five years.”

“Most of the time, it’s been myself playing that role, Albus Dumbledore,” Salazar counters. “Unless we’re suddenly at odds, you’ve nothing to be complaining about.”

Minerva’s mouth is turned down in disapproval, though Severus isn’t certain who the disapproval is for. “I will be asking the intelligent question, then. What happened to Mundungus’s body, Salazar?”

“His Muggle family has an old crypt in Kensal Green. The Underground made certain that Mundungus was politely interred after his unlamented death. His name, date of birth, and date of death were even etched upon the wall. We weren’t concerned with anyone in Wizarding Britain finding out.” Salazar’s eyes flash with irritation. “After all, who would think to look in a non-magical cemetery for a properly buried magician’s body?”

Arthur sighs. “You’ve certainly got a point there. If Mundungus had disappeared completely, none of us would have thought to look in Muggle places. I didn’t even know he was Muggle-born, or that he traveled outside of wizarding areas.”

Aberforth looks amused by the entire situation. “You gave Mundungus a better deal than I would have granted him.”

“Thank you for treating Mundungus with dignity,” Dumbledore finally says, though it’s obvious he is still unhappy.

“Dignity.” Salazar shakes his head. “I don’t think his part of the Fletcher clan knew the meaning of the word. Those of his relatives who were not currently incarcerated came to Fletcher’s funeral, and I imagine they attempted to steal half of the décor in the cemetery as they departed.” He reaches out and steadies Nizar when his brother suddenly wobbles in place. “You’re meant to be standing right now.”
“Oh, I’d love to be, but I think the coffee and the adrenaline are both wearing off.” Nizar’s bleary-eyed look is swiftly returning. “I’d be willing to take Tolerantu if you had it.”

“I ran out. I was storing it in my fucking desk when it took its sudden trip to the bottom of that chamber,” Severus says. “I haven’t had the chance to brew more.”

“Fuck,” Nizar utters in dismay. “I’m going to make bloody tea, then.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Molly says. “I’ll help. I’m sure we could all use some tea.”

The minutes crawl by. Severus would much prefer a dull morning compared to this teeth-grinding waiting. It tries his patience; he’s never liked being in the position of having to wait and watch. It made him foul-tempered for years without end. He doesn’t even taste the tea that Nizar and Molly make, though part of that process was Nizar wondering why they don’t just put the tea leaves directly into the kettle, and Molly insisting that a tea strainer was less of a mess.

Bill and Lupin return after a full hour has gone by, but to his relief, they have company. Gwen has changed a great deal since the age of seventeen; Severus barely recognizes her. She has the same Nordic blonde hair as Daphne, and shares Astoria’s grey eyes, but is now in her early thirties. Severus can see hints of Madlyn Selwyn Greengrass in the proud structure of her face, but she doesn’t resemble her father at all. She is also bleeding from the nose and mouth, signs that she’s been struck more than once. Her robes also suffered from her brief imprisonment, and are torn in several places.

“Gwen.” Salazar is by her side in an instant, holding out his hands. “Are you all right?”

She nods, hesitates, and then allows Salazar to hug her. “Fucking bastards,” she mutters. “They had to go and fucking well ruin this day, didn’t they?”

“The baby?” Salazar asks.

“They didn’t know, and they didn’t…” Guinevere shivers. “They didn’t torture more. No Cruciatus. I don’t think the baby would have survived that. I would have stayed behind to kill them all if they’d done so.”

“Who was it?” Kingsley asks, giving an approving nod as Nizar retrieves his wand to cast a healer’s diagnostic charm.

“The bloody Carrow twins,” Lupin spits in rage.

Severus feels the blood in his veins turn to ice. The twins like to play with their toys. They must have been rushed, or they would have been generous in their use of the Cruciatus curse, along with other favorite hexes.

“And the Averys,” Bill adds. “John Senior and John Junior. When we nabbed Gwen here and got out of there, Moody was in the midst of taking Avery Senior’s existence as a personal insult.”

“She’s all right. The baby, I mean,” Nizar says, and Guinevere looks at him in surprise. “Er, sorry. You didn’t know she was a girl yet, did you?”

Guinevere suddenly subjects Nizar to a strangling hug. “No, I didn’t know that! Thank you, Professor!”

“Uh—” Nizar looks startled before he pats Guinevere’s shoulder. “You’re welcome. Stand back and let me heal your face.”
Molly brings Guinevere a steaming cup of tea the moment the healing is done. “Here you are, dear. I know they say lately that tea isn’t good for babies, but I refuse to go along with that foolishness.”

Guinevere accepts the tea with a shy smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Weasley.”

“Well…welcome back to the land of the living, I guess,” Charlie says, grinning. “Nice to see you and all that!”

“I’ll miss being deceased,” Guinevere responds dryly. “It was much simpler, and I didn’t have to deal with my idiot father.”

“What happened? How the hell did they capture you?” Salazar asks. “I need to know if the others are in danger, Gwen.”

Guinevere doesn’t seem to mind his insistence. “I wasn’t paying the sort of attention I should have been. It was a crime of opportunity, Saul. They were looking to use a fool to spy on the Order, and Mundungus Fletcher was certainly that. I gave them the perfect opportunity by walking past a pair of Disillusioned Carrows in Knockturn Alley this morning. They were making their plans for infiltrating this morning’s meeting when the Polyjuice wore off. They realized they had a prisoner…” Guinevere presses her lips together in sudden anger. “They realized they had a traitor. I don’t think they’ve told You-Know-Who, not yet, but I wouldn’t chance it by returning. I would assume that he now considers every deceased Death Eater’s final moments to be suspect.”

Moody’s elephant Patronus chooses that moment to charge into the room in its usual, shocking manner. Severus doesn’t hex it this time, but Ted nearly does before he growls something in Castilian and puts his wand away.

“Kingsley,” the Patronus says, lifting its trunk and flicking its tail as it speaks. “We got one Carrow and one Avery apiece. Alecto was always smarter than her brother, and John Junior is quicker with a wand than his old man. We’re taking them directly to the Ministry holding cells, and then we need to call in someone for the wards. I don’t trust them not to figure out a way past what we have.”

Kingsley listens, stone-faced, before casting his lynx Patronus. “Understood. Put in your request for the warding expert, and if they push back, tell them I’ll have their heads if they don’t send one of their best from that department immediately. I’ll bring Blishwick along shortly to join his friends.”

After the lynx departs, Kingsley turns and gives Guinevere an apologetic look. “I’m truly sorry, but given what’s happened, I’ll need to take your statement.” He pauses. “It will also help us to expedite the paperwork that would see you recognized as a living person in Wizarding Britain again.”

Guinevere snorts. “Well, how can a girl say no to that? I just want to have my wife join me after we’re in a safe room, Auror Shacklebolt. Once the rest of the Underground finds out what happened this morning, she’ll be beside herself until she sees me in one piece.”

“I’ll just be saying that it’s good to see another Slytherin that survived that madman,” Aberforth says, smiling at Guinevere.

“You were—” Guinevere raises an eyebrow. “Oh, that makes so much sense. Thank you, Aberforth.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore says gravely. “It is good to see another Slytherin returned to the light.”

Guinevere glares at Dumbledore. “You can save your pretty words. You didn’t have any for me when I needed them, so you can stuff them up your backside now!”
For the second time in a year, Severus strongly regrets not owning a camera. The expression on Dumbledore’s face in that moment is priceless.

Guinevere gives her emptied teacup to Molly and faces Kingsley. “Whenever you’re ready, Auror Shacklebolt.”

Salazar squeezes Guinevere’s arm. “I need to see to the others. Did your mobile survive that lot of idiots?”

Guinevere smirks and pats her robe. “They didn’t know what to look for. It’s fine, Saul. I’ll call you the moment the Ministry is done with me.”

“Good.” Salazar looks at Kingsley. “If you try to imprison her, you’ll regret it.”

Kingsley inclines his head. “I intend nothing of the sort, I promise. The documentation and processing that will recognize members of your Underground as spies working for the Ministry to undermine You-Know-Who is already a work in progress.”

Salazar is visibly surprised by that. “Thank you. Take care of her, please.”

Kingsley collects Blishwick by lifting him with a flick of his wand. Blishwick is still blubbing in silence, and emitting several foul odors, besides. Kingsley grabs the bound man with one hand, gathers up Floo powder for the fireplace, and turns the flames green. “Ministry of Magic, Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department’s Office,” he announces, and drags Blishwick with him into the flames. Guinevere turns around long enough to lock eyes with Severus, her mouth quirking up in a brief, baffling smile, before she follows Kingsley into the Floo.

Salazar grips Nizar’s shoulder for a brief moment, steps back, and Disapparates. Nizar looks concerned, but turns his attention back to the others and plasters a mad grin onto his face. “So! Was there anything else we needed to discuss today?”

“Fuck, but I hope not,” Emmaline mutters.

“Kingsley was the one to ask for this meeting. In his absence, I suppose we shall consider the meeting adjourned,” Dumbledore says, releasing a heavy sigh.

Severus hides a smile. Dumbledore is still quietly fuming over his overture being rebuffed. It’s not a sensation Dumbledore would be used to, but the bastard deserves to learn what that sort of rejection feels like.

However, Dumbledore has not lasted this long by not knowing how to turn inconveniences into opportunities. He looks directly at Nizar and begins twinkling again. “I did wish to discuss your guest back at Hogwarts.” The word guest reeks of being used to replace the term inconvenience.

“Oh? If she made a teacher cry, it’s not my doing. They’re grown adults and can handle their own affairs,” Nizar responds, not taking the baited opportunity to apologize for any of it.

“Oh—no. To my knowledge, that did not occur. A bit of warning would have been appreciated, however,” Dumbledore says.

Nizar tilts his head. “Are you asking for an apology for your sudden trip to Hogsmeade, or for not announcing my guest?”

Dumbledore continues to smile. “Both would be a kindness.”
“I’m not apologizing for the first unless my aim was off and you shared in Lucius Malfoy’s experience with the hog pen,” Nizar says at once. “You and Aberforth are also grown adults.” Aberforth glowers at Nizar for that, growing low in his throat, but Nizar ignores him. They both probably consider it part of Nizar’s deserved revenge for the Sheep’s Clothing hex, even if Aberforth would have preferred literally any other form of revenge aside from his brother.

“As for my guest…” Nizar raises both eyebrows. “I wasn’t aware that staff needed permission to receive visitors, or to invite said visitors to overnight in their own living spaces.”

“No,” Dumbledore admits. “It is, however, considered good manners to introduce guests to the rest of staff.”

Severus finds himself exchanging irritated, commiserating glances with Sirius Black. Dumbledore only seems to give a damn about good manners when it’s convenient, and that’s something they both have equal experience with.

Severus really did like it better when he hated Sirius Black without reservation.

“If you’d bothered to ask her, you would know that her name is Eithnemael of the Stone Hill, part of the Veela Clans who reside around Edinburgh and share a strong relationship with the sea rather than the lochs.” Nizar’s smile is almost as sharp as it was for Blishwick. “She is my daughter-in-law. I hope there is no difficulty with my family visiting my home.”

Dumbledore looks startled. “Daughter-in-law?” he blurts out, but is almost immediately drowned out by Fleur’s delighted squeal.

Severus rubs at his ear as Fleur pounces Nizar and grabs both of his hands. “She is still alive, your son’s wife?” When Nizar nods, she all but crushes him in a hug. “That is amazing news! I would dearly love to meet her, my friend!”

Nizar looks startled enough that Severus wonders if there is something cultural about Veela and a declaration of friendship that he’s unaware of. As if Severus doesn’t have enough to do, now he has to research Veela customs—possibly just to survive Eithnemael’s existence.

“If you come back to Hogwarts with us later, I would be happy to introduce you,” Nizar offers. Fleur nods, granting him a bright smile as she agrees.

Black decides to prove that he is also learning some measure of subtlety by not losing his bloody mind as Fleur did, especially when he has more cause to be enthusiastic. Instead, his is the measured, careful intonations of the cautious Pure-blood who is insistent on observing societal niceties. “Or if she isn’t opposed to traveling, she would be welcome here.”

It’s also Black’s means of asking if he shares in Fleur’s invitation without speaking of it directly. Severus wonders if Black would have been able to develop this sort of maturity if his son was still a child, and quickly stomps on that thought. It just makes everything too fucking awkward.

Nizar nods. “I’ll ask her, but I don’t know how familiar she is with London. She never really liked to travel, not if she could help it. Hogwarts may still be easier.”

If Dumbledore is aware of the byplay, he shows no sign of it. “I will be certain to let the others know of our guest’s identity, then, so they are less concerned,” he says cheerfully. “I’ll be returning to Hogwarts directly. When can we expect the rest of you?”

Severus glances at Nizar, who shrugs. “I’m taking a bloody nap before I leave this house to avoid being ill from traveling,” he says. “Severus?”
“I’ll wait here with you. It isn’t as if there is a need to rush.” He isn’t opposed to another opportunity to sleep, even in this house. Every time he has the chance to rest, he feels less like wrung-out shit. Severus will take advantage of that as often as he can until the damage from Voldemort’s fucking spell is healed.

“I’ll be waiting for Rubeus and Olympe to return, Albus,” Minerva says. “I’ll be able to inform you what they got up to later this evening.”

With Dumbledore’s departure through the Floo, it doesn’t take long for Twelve Grimmauld Place to begin emptying of Order members. Poppy departs on Dumbledore’s heels, muttering about her patients in the hospital wing. Bill remains with Fleur, who mentions wishing to further discuss Eithnemael with Nizar, but the rest of the Weasleys take their leave—Arthur back to the Ministry, Charlie back to his temporary position working in the Welsh dragon reserve, and Molly back to the Burrow. Higgs and Urquhart take the stairs to Apparate back to the Ministry and return to their duties, and to add their own testimony to that morning’s events. Emmaline goes with them, as does Oliver Wood, who mentions needing to fill out additional paperwork for a leave of absence with the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Diggle practically rushes to escape the kitchen in that cluster, still wary of Nizar’s temper. Andromeda and Ted leave by the kitchen stairs after saying farewell to their daughter, whose hair turns bright pink to match the embarrassed flush on her cheeks.

Black looks around once the kitchen is down to those who are either war mages, part of the Underground, or both. Then he points his wand at the ceiling, muttering under his breath. Several bursts of bright light reveal listening spells being explosively dismantled, which includes a dish breaking and a teacup flinging itself against the wall to shatter. “Dammit!” Black shouts. “I’ll have to clear out the entire bloody house again!”

“What the hell was that all about?” Bill asks, wide-eyed.

“Fucking listening spells,” Black snarls. “The utter bloody **nerve** of that bastard!”

Tonks nudges Bill. “Don’t worry about it. He means Dumbledore.”

Bill gapes at her. “Why the hell would Professor Dumbledore be—you know what? Never mind. I feel like I just stumbled into something I don’t want to know about.”

Aberforth gives Nizar an odd look. “Do you need me for something? You’ve got that look about you.”

“It’s your choice, but I think it might be useful if you stayed,” Nizar replies, and then looks at Black. “Is the first floor parlor available?”

Black raises his eyebrows in understanding. “I have to go clear out the ground floor and the first storey of listening spells, anyway. I’ll make certain that Roderick isn’t lurking about to deal with the morning mail, as well. I meant to ask him if he would go upstairs and place a few dozen magical traps in the attic for whatever vermin has decided to move in while I’ve been mucking about with everything down here.”

“I’ll head upstairs, too,” Lupin offers. “Frances usually returns from the market about this time, anyway, and as much as she complains, she does appreciate the help with getting everything down these stairs. She’ll want to know if we’d prefer breakfast, brunch, or lunch, as well.”

“Brunch merging into lunch is my guess,” Black says, and goes upstairs.

“Bill. Fleur. Tonks.” Nizar looks as if he’d much prefer to be fighting Death Eaters, and that is what
warns Severus as to what’s about to happen. “If you would join us upstairs after Sirius is done clearing the house of listening spells, there is something we need to discuss.”

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**Brothers DeSlizarse** by rabblescum

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