Snakeskins

by Sunruner

Summary

Twenty years after the end of the Second Wizarding War, tragedy at the world's safest school prompts a clash between two Magical Ministries and an inquiry of a different kind. If the students and staff of Hogwarts School can't earn back the world's trust, then one Nation may do what the Dark Lord could not and close its doors forever.

Notes

This story is a heavily edited repost of Snakeskins from Fanfiction.net. While I love this story immensely, it's been in dire need of hard revision and plot corrections for years, and AO3 has the blank slate needed to let me post this updated version without losing the comments and conversations from the original.

As of posting, Snakeskins is 173 chapters long, not including bonus chapters and extra side content. I will be posting the revisions here on AO3 in chunks by year when I have them edited and finished. This will be a slow project, so feel free to read the full version on FFN if you'd like to know what's coming next! The order of later events will change between the two versions, but the quality will be exceptionally better here.
Please enjoy this labour of love, one which began in 2013 and is still puttering quietly along now, in 2019.

- Inspired by Snakeskins by Me, Sunruner
If there was ever going to be one impossible thing, one question that no nation no matter how old was ever going to have a simple, succinct answer to, it was involvement. How close was too close? How soon was too soon?

There would always be an inkling of things about to go wrong, a light fever that barely registered in the morning but which hung on for days and weeks at a time. An unconscious tremor or subtle restlessness that burrowed right down to the bone and sank its teeth in for the long haul.

And to be perfectly honest, even after his thousands of years of life the Nation now known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland still wouldn't have noticed the issue at all if it hadn't sprung up right under his nose.

Or.

To be a bit more literal.

It sprung right out of his chimney flue.

"Mister Kirkland! Terribly sorry to intrude!" It was a portly old man in an indigo robe, a lopsided green hat with yellow tassels swinging from the side like Romani coins: terribly out of fashion but there none the less. "Would have sent an owl you see but there was no, oh- uh- Hello!" And he was traipsing green gas and smoke across Arthur Kirkland's study.

The ash was long gone from the converted fireplace as it had been sealed at some point over the last three decades, but that wasn't enough to stop someone like this. No, in fact the decorative grate set in front of the hearth was doing a much better job of getting in the short little man's way as he fumbled and fought and eventually tripped his way properly into the room, knocking that florescent hat off his head and exposing a rusty crown of thin red hair combed with grey.

"M... Mister Weasley..." Under these circumstances, Arthur Kirkland gave himself credit for not losing his composure all at once and jumping up screaming for the old man to get out of his office. For once, he managed to keep calm with a raging pulse and bile in his throat. "I'm in the middle of something."

Something, meaning his two guests: a pair of men in suits who'd both twisted around in their chairs to look at the fireplace when it exploded with green flames. One was done up in charcoal grey with a white collar flattened around his throat, the other steel blue with expensive leather shoes creaking somewhere out of sight as he shifted. They were both wearing fine wool with polished cufflinks, fashionable ties and starched shirts.

Not the sort of people he wanted exposed to a frumpy wizard, because that was Arthur Weasley in a nutshell: frumpy, well-meaning, and nearly as witless as the rest of the magical community.

But then it struck him that there was far too much silence in the office for one of the wizarding world's usual check-ins.

"Mister Weasley?" Dropping the title, Kirkland watched the man in the brilliant robe do something he never did in front of muggles: he went terribly pale and started to shake. "Arthur?"

Even calling him by his first name didn't inspire a change, but before the Nation could stand up and try something else, one of the men across the desk from him stood up first.
"Please, have a seat, signore. You seem faint."

"Weasley?" the question was for Kirkland and he looked at the speaker directly, not afraid of irritated green eyes telling him how annoying this interruption was and how much he didn't want to be slouched over in that chair for much longer not getting anything done. Trying to come up with a solution, Kirkland held his breath for a moment before remembering himself and finding the words for an introduction.

"Gentlemen, this is Arthur Weasley, my domestic contact from the department of Muggle Relations here in London. Mister Weasley," and a quick look at his guests before confirming which names to use. "These men are the Vargas Brothers, my international counter-parts from Rome, Italy."

"A pleasure, I- actually no." Weasley spoke first and stopped the rest of them from saying anything. The wizard wasn't looking at any of them anymore, he was still staring blankly at the seat the younger brother, North Italy, had just offered him. It was like he'd forgotten what a chair was as he shook his head, wearing his age on his face as he looked up with sad grey eyes. "Not a pleasure at all, I'm afraid. Mister Kirkland you must come with me at once."

"What? I'm in the middle of-"

"There's no time," Hearing someone who was usually bumbling and good-natured lower his voice so was uncanny, but Weasley brought it down just enough to sound desperate. "We must go."

Kirkland checked his watch and when he looked back up Weasley was staring at the floor.

"It's ten in the morning, man, there's no reason-"

"Sir there's been a death!" Weasley hissed, frightened by his own words and just standing there trying not to shake.

"A death where?" He asked.

"Two. Two deaths, sir..."

"Where?" He pressed.

Arthur Weasley was not a wizard known for holding his tongue or getting scared of anything. He was a veteran of two magical wars with children and children-in-law decorated as heroes and soldiers. But he didn't speak up now, sixty years of hard work and magic made a lively wizard appear old and rugged, so when he looked up he found Feliciano Vargas first where he was standing next to the vacant chair, then looked to Lovino who was still seated across from Kirkland at the desk and watching closely. It brought a kind of weight to the moment that their host had to admire and take seriously when it was finally his turn to carry that stare again.

"At Hogwarts, sir. This morning, nine o'clock: they found them."

One of his guests gasped, Arthur just felt cold.

"Tell me they weren't students." It was the only thing he could say.

"One fifth year, one seventh. Siblings sir."

"Tell me they-"

"International students, sir, which is why the Minister of Magic and Headmistress are both asking for
It was a mechanical response, still sitting behind his desk, for the representation of England to look at the dual personas of the Italian Republic and try to address them. South Italy spoke first:

"We can reschedule, my brother and I can keep busy at the consulate for today."

"Or we can come with you."

South Italy did not like this idea, but Kirkland really didn't have the presence of mind to worry about that, he just spoke up with a different question for Weasley:

"International: from where?" Who was Arthur going to have to call and visit to discuss this with?

"I don't know if I can give information like-"

"Weasley!" Now was not the time to be keeping information from him, there was precious little space left in his brain for anything that wasn't trying to piece together the situation and work out where precisely he had left his wand and robes.

"Italian, sir. Sirs."

That settled it. From the way South Italy closed his eyes to North Italy's fingertips biting into the wooden back of the chair, Kirkland stood up immediately and spoke to his original guests.

"Do you have any of your materials?" Robes, wands, anything that would let them easily move around in Wizarding London. Of course, North Italy was the only once to answer with a quick shake of his head, but he was already speaking quickly to his brother in their own language:

"I'll go with them and learn what I can, but one of us has to be in Rome."

"I'll be on the next flight home this morning and contact our ministry while I'm in the air. Fuck." South Italy already had his phone out and was surfing through apps to find a ticket, and Kirkland knew why he didn't simply suggest magic: it was too difficult to explain to muggle bosses.

"Minister Kirkland-"

"Eng- Arthur, I need to borrow robes."

"Yes, this way."

"Kirkland!"

"Do you expect us to wander around wandless in suits and ties, Weasley? Hurry up, there's another fireplace downstairs!" While Kirkland spoke, South Italy was stuffing papers in a brief-case and already had his brother's laptop bag over his shoulder. The host quickly led the other two away. He heard Feliciano call back with a question but the answer was a shout to hurry up and not worry so much. Whatever rude feelings came from abandoning a guest to see himself out of the house were washed away by the reason why.

Thank god they weren't at Parliament today. It was always better to take fellow nations to meetings at his private home: there was nothing stressful between himself and Italy at the moment anyways. It was 2017, the recession that had strangled Europe was slowly fading day by day and as Kirkland hurried down into the basement of his London Townhouse he wasn't edgy about showing North Italy where he kept his magical closet.
A locked door with a simple charm to recognize who he was when he touched the knob, and a trio of fairy friends fluttering around the corner that Weasley saw at once and ducked away from while Italy put on a face like he might sneeze without recognizing them.

His basement wasn't to code, not London building code at least, but the heavy stones reached almost too far into the ground so a bit of magic had been needed to bend the sewer pipes out of the way. Tall closets, dusty tables: he didn't come down here as often as he'd like anymore but still knew where everything was. No electric lights, just candle stubs charmed to light up when the door opened so they could give the dingy space a murky glow.

"Here, pull this on." The second closet he passed was full of wizarding robes, a midnight blue with green cuffs coming out first as he rifled through the folded clothes and shook one out. They were nearly the same height, but Italy made a terrible face as he quickly took the velvet and started opening the buttons and toggles.

"Even I can see that this is out of style." But that didn't stop him from pulling it on. The blue didn't look very good with the auburn wash of his hair or the sun-kissed look of his skin, but he didn't complain about the permanent wrinkles or shower of dust as his expensive grey suit was covered up completely.

The grey robe Kirkland found for himself was threadbare in a few places and he wouldn't look like much of a minister with the trodden hem, but he was more concerned with hiding muggle office clothes as he pulled the heavy thing on and kept walking, leaving the closet open and rifled through as he immediately went hunting for his wand.

"You really do live like muggles, don't you? None of this has been touched in ages!"

"Twenty years." Kirkland answered, following a path between dusty tables of abandoned maps and discarded potion materials, a little bit of fairy light helping him along to the small podium resting against the far wall.

"That makes sense, but Signore Weasley, please: my wand is in Rome, can't you do something about these wrinkles? Or the colour?"

"To travel so far without magic, I wish I was young enough to try something like that again."

Arthur Kirkland's wand was one of the most heavily protected items in his home. He didn't use it very often: he could still remember a time before wide-spread wand usage, and he'd learned from nations who'd never imagined endowing so much power on a simple wooden rod. Thirteen inches of English Oak with a lock from a chimera's mane serving as the core, that last part was something of a secret after the banning of chimera hunts back in the eighteenth century. The golden lustre of the old wood was alluring, almost hypnotizing, with decals of roses winding around the base to form a grip.

Three enchantments were set over the wand and its stand. One fell away simply by Kirkland himself reaching through it, the next needed a few ancient words, and the last...

A small pocket knife and a tiny nick on his thumb next to the nail, just a little bit of blood to make the last hex break apart and stop him from bursting into flame or being tossed right across the Thames for daring to come too close.

It was like saying hello to an old, sleepy friend who was happy to be of use again as his hand closed over the roses. There was a warmth that came to him before the hazy question of why began to nag at the air, but that question did not have a pleasant answer.
"Alright, let’s go!" The podium had a little cabinet door and Arthur quickly rifled through that for what he needed: a bag of pocket change with at least one gold galleon as emergency money, and a leather sleeve for his wand that hooked up under his robe to stow the old rod out of sight until he needed it.

There was another fireplace down here just like he’d said, looking back at the others just in time to see North Italy’s face as he flinched from the gust of wind from Weasley's wand. It blew a terrible mess of dust from the floor and fabric and he didn't look much better for the experience, but at least they both came hurrying along.

"Are you sure you want to come with us?" A stash of Floo Powder in a china tea pot rattled as he pulled back his wand for the first time in twenty years, rolling the oak rod between his fingers and setting off a gout of red fire directly into the hearth. There was no wood: it didn't need any to burn for a little while.

"You just told me two Italian children are dead at your school." Kirkland expected to turn and see Weasley next to him, but the footsteps were Italy's, and an uncharacteristically harsh expression was on his narrow face. "Of course I’m coming."

"That settles it." A pinch of floo powder between his fingers and with a sudden blast of light and sound, the red flames turned brilliant green and Kirkland looked for Weasley. "Lead on, where are they waiting?"

"Hogsmeade Village, sir."

"You first then, show us the way."

Both nations stepped back enough to let the Wizard through first. Arthur Weasley's stooped shoulders and balding head made the flames lick and swirl around him so high the grandfatherly old man almost vanished without saying a word.

"Hogsmeade Station!" He declared in a full voice, and with a loud roar of flames Arthur Weasley vanished, leaving Kirkland and North Italy standing in a London basement.

"Feliciano," Kirkland offered the floo powder to Italy first, watching him nervously take a pinch between his fingers as the flames settled back to a crimson glow. "However this turns out, please know that I'm sorry."

It almost looked like Italy tried to grin at him or say something foolish, but reality came back too quickly and it crushed the forced cheer. He took the breath and wore the smile, but they both faltered and slipped silently back to the dusty floor.

"I wanted to take expense reports home with me, England. Not caskets."

He didn't apologize again. Maybe in his heart, or in the brief silence that hung there with red light splashed over their faces did he feel it, but he didn't say it again. He just held Italy's gaze until the other Nation broke away first, tossing the silver powder into the fire and letting it change to a safe green again before hesitantly stepping forward. It was hard getting used to magic after decades of equating fire with burns.

A deep breath that looked like it almost pulled old soot into his mouth, and with an accented voice raised high enough to make sure the words were clear:

"Hogsmeade station!"
Italy vanished in a storm of green sparks, and England soon followed.

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Twenty years ago, one of the most terrifying wizards in modern history had been brought down for the second and, hopefully, final time.

What had been terrifying about that sorcerer, in Feliciano's world, had been his reach. There had probably been worse wizards, blacker souls, crueler hearts, but no name in the Italian records kept in Rome or any of the northern cities came with the same far reaching chill as Tom Marvolo Riddle: Lord Voldemort.

He'd spread a fever across Wizarding Europe that had brought Feliciano and those like him directly back into the magical world and its politics for the first time in decades. For some nations, like Germany, it had been their first major contact with the Wizarding world: something more than a strange letter or a snarky giggle from the looking glass. England and his brothers had born the worst of it: the mountains where Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry sat were Scottish in origin, and the major Wizarding families were mostly collected around London and out across the Welsh and English countrysides.

But Albania had suffered the fever and wracking pains of a population in turmoil. Poland had reached the nerve-wracking state of vomiting blood when the fear and paranoia grew too strong. Feliciano himself had dusted off spell books while his brother, just trying to hold onto his sanity, had snapped his wand and thrown the pieces into the Strait of Messina.

Plunging back into the magical world with no warning was a shock. He almost choked on the green flames and the taste of burnt flesh from the Floo powder. He knew the last part was just his mind playing tricks on him, Floo powder tasted like any kind of soot, but the connection stuck.

From Hogsmeade station there was a thestral carriage waiting for them: terrifying creatures with only bones and no real head, but they were the best way to get around without flying. It was impossible to Apparate up the steep mountainside to the peak where Hogwarts castle loomed with its towers and high windows, furthermore, it was impossible to expect Feliciano or England to perform magic like that out of the blue. If given a wand Feliciano would have been lucky if he could set the tip aglow, nevermind vanish into thin air and reappear miles away at will.

In the carriage he heard the next piece of terrible news, not the first or the last: just the next.

"Marco and Angela Rosetti, they--"

He couldn't stop the noise he made, doubling over with elbows on his knees, hands up rubbing his face and eyes squeezed shut, praying this was a dream.

"You know them?" Of course England would ask a question like that.

"They're mine: they're from Florence..." Had he known them personally? No, but he knew their name. He knew their ancestral home. He knew their parents' generation had nearly been torn to shreds by the in-fighting between pure-blood members of an ancient house, Feliciano couldn't see the way ahead exactly, but he knew that if this didn't destroy one of his oldest Wizarding families, then they would still be left standing on their one last crippled leg.

"Marco was just finishing his seventh year, exams are at the end of the month." The school year was almost over, there was no kind way to take something like this. "Angela was in the same house, two years younger. They were both found this morning."
"What do you mean 'found'?'" Feliciano had to pick his head up when he asked, groping through the borrowed blue robes trying to find his phone. Of course, by the time he pulled the device out and into his hand, they'd gone too far for it to work anymore. The electric current died and he watched the shocked little screen try to flash the power sign at him before it abruptly cut out. He'd have to send an owl to Rome when they reached the school.

"It... it looks like suicide, sir."

"I don't believe that."

"We'll see when we get there." England cut in so quickly Feliciano had to stop and try to hear what tone he'd just used on the wizard sitting across from him. Maybe he'd been too harsh, but where dead children were concerned he couldn't pretend to see any other issues.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There were older schools in Italy, there was even one down in his brother's territories that matched Hogwarts in terms of prestige and honours, but that didn't mean England and Scotland's high fortress with its odd name wasn't impressive. Something was lacking from the high towers and dark stones as they approached however, the gates opening and closing behind them as the grounds rattled along outside the carriage. They were moving faster than if it had been horses, but Feliciano found himself craving a car engine to drag them up the mountain with the pedal pressed down to the floor.

For a school with several hundred students, it was silent when they finally left the carriage and moved through the grand entrance hall. Four hourglasses twice as tall as Feliciano stood glittering under the sun's filtered rays: rubies, emeralds, sapphires and topaz stones denoting points for the four major houses.

"Which house did you say?" The first words he'd uttered since the carriage stopped the wizard in the purple robe from hurrying off without them, but the old man looked so sad when he answered.

"Slytherin, sir. The green ones." Slytherin, the wide glass body with a silver snake coiled protectively over the hoard of house points.

It had been at least two hundred years since Feliciano had set foot in this school. It wasn't entirely different, but he didn't have the time to wonder about where they were going until they were already there. A tall, noble looking witch, older than the Wizard who'd brought them this far, was waiting for them atop several flights of shifting stairs. Her crimson robes were edged with black mink, a pointed hat with short, tightly clipped black feathers on her head, and there was a heavy gold ring on her left hand, wireframe glasses perched over her tiny pointed nose.

"Headmistress McGonagall," Weasley spoke up first, the platform they were standing on now was directly in front of a pair of wide double-doors, the old wood stained white with some kind of varnish. "Here with me I've brought-"

"Arthur Kirkland." The witch's voice was as thin as her painfully white face, and there was a tremor through her pale lips that looked like it didn't belong there after the way she'd stood so still waiting for them to come closer. The smile she drew up was a mask that didn't fit quite right. "As unchanged as ever, I see. Time does not touch you."

"Headmistress." England stepped forward and bowed his scruffy blonde head, kissing the witch's hand with a reverence that told Feliciano to keep the nervous twitch in his feet under control. She was worth the respect England was paying her. "I wish I could say you looked well, Minerva: this can't be easy."
"No." He appreciated the weight she put on that one word, and there was sympathy when he saw how her frail hands were shaking before she clasped them tight in front of herself. "I'm afraid this morning marks my final year at Hogwarts, I..." Her pause was delicate, it almost felt like she did it on purpose: if her eyes hadn't lost focus like that, Feliciano could have believed it. "I cannot abide to see any more young lives extinguished in what should be the safest of havens."

His patience was rewarded, because while England tried to whisper kind words in a voice that couldn't be overheard, the Headmistress lifted her black eyes to Feliciano and spoke straight over her nation's quiet voice.

"And I'm sorry, sir, your name?"

"Ah-" clearly England didn't want him to speak, or he was just being himself and trying to appear as utterly polite and in control as he always wanted to be in a crisis. He straightened up immediately and Feliciano just took the few short steps to come closer as he was introduced. "This is my Italian counterpart, Feliciano Vargas. Everything I do for England, Ma'am, he does for Italy."

The way England said it made it clear she knew more than Weasley, because the Headmistress almost seemed to wilt before straightening back up again. Her hand moved from its clasped position into his, but before Feliciano could mutter a condolence or try to kiss her fingers the way England had done, he felt thin fingers clutch and hold onto his with a strength that denied the shakes invading her body. She also met his eyes directly, unflinching, and that was something very few foreign nationals could usually accomplish.

"Then you, sir," But when she spoke, her voice was fragile. "Have my deepest, and most sincere apologies. My school could not keep your children safe."

He hadn't known he was angry, Feliciano hadn't felt it creep up on him until it was suddenly extinguished. It took a genuine soul to reach as far as the one clinging to his hand was doing, and he felt himself respond and appreciate every ounce of strength she summoned to do it with.

"The children, Ma'am." Was all he said.

"Of course, please follow me: the School Healer and Head of Slytherin House is waiting inside."

She swept away from him and Feliciano watched the shaking vanish and tremors disappear under sweeping red and dower black. The white doors opened and a wide hall of hospital beds and curtains unfolded before them.

The silence persisted as they walked, even their footsteps were muffled over the polished stones. Where Feliciano expected two people, he found himself approaching only one as they passed rows of empty white beds and curtains tied back to open the space a little more. The chamber felt like they were walking into the mouth of a beast, so he was thankful when the wizard they met next seemed as apprehensive about the silence as he was.

The wizard was tall, pale, and his slicked back white hair was pulled up across his scalp as if to make his face seem even pointier. He was wearing robes with long white panels broken up with stripes of green, a thick silver belt cinched his narrow waist where a white leather case for his wand hung. He was wiping his hands off on a thick square of white cloth when he noticed them coming, quietly folding the fabric without a sound and setting it on a bronze tray hovering at his elbow. The tray floated off once he was done with it, but the wizard didn't move towards them or say a single word until Feliciano and the rest of them were properly in front of him.

It took that long for Feliciano to realize that this new, younger person wasn't looking at the
Headmistress or England, but right at him. He probably stood out too much with his darker skin, even the smallest resemblance would...

"I've searched them." No introductions this time, no quiet words or even condolences. This wizard had as hard a time as everyone else meeting his eyes, but at least he spoke: it was refreshing to be handled bluntly. "I've combed over them for enchantments, hexes, charms, anything. I've barred anyone from entering the Slytherin dormitories until you arrived."

"Gentlemen, this is Professor Malfoy: Hogwarts' resident Healer and Head of Slytherin House." The headmistress' voice introduced him and Feliciano mechanically offered and followed through with a handshake. They were standing in front of the only closed curtains in the hospital wing, and neither he nor the wizard in charge said anything: Malfoy just turned away and gently touched the white sheets, pulling one back without asking who Feliciano was or what right he had to be there.

Feliciano silently passed under the sheet and then heard it fall shut behind him. He was alone and it was better that way.

He was left facing two beds under the ambient white light, the sounds of voices muffled behind him as he took a moment to collect himself. White sheets with the shapes of childrens' bodies underneath them, tented over noses and toes, draped over rigid arms and silent chests.

One was longer than the other- one had been taller than the other. A brother and sister, he approached the smaller bed: he took the worst blow first.

It was hard to see dead children, and he liked to think that it was a universal thing. Nationality didn't mean as much when the victim was too young to face death, because pride and legacy and hope and all the things the nation stood for all failed when life was snuffed out. As he peeled back the crisp linen, Feliciano prayed for peace and his God failed him at once.

Her face was not beautiful. Under the scars, maybe, under the shallow cuts and rough gouges cut into full cheeks and blistering white lips. The wounds had been fresh and now they were clean. Her long black hair was newly combed and braided down the side of her head under the covers over her shoulder. She had been a small thing at sixteen, and when Feliciano touched the gouges down her cheeks he counted fours and threes in parallel lines.

He looked for her hand under the white sheet. Her nails were clean, suspiciously pure, but the length and the size and the spaces between them... If no enchantment had driven a child to carve up her own face with her own hands, then what had?

There was a silver chain around her neck, a heavy cross coming loose when he gently tugged to bring it to light. It was studded with small white crystals and there was a hum of magic to it, but when Feliciano turned it over in his palm he saw where the silver had worn away from nervous rubbing. When he looked to her hands again, her thumbs were calloused from the abrasion.

She didn't look like she was asleep, she wasn't resting or at peace. To Feliciano's eyes, the young girl who'd taken her own life a world away from home looked like she was about to weep and wail from the next life back into this one.

He undid the clasp on the chain. He vowed to deliver it to her mother when they returned home, kissed her marred forehead, and replaced the sheet.

Her brother only made things harder, because whatever had tormented the young girl in robes edged with green had stolen the life from a boy whose knuckles were bruised and palms sliced open. And Feliciano made sure to look at his hands first, to pick up cold flesh and touch them, beg stiff fingers
to bend after rigor had already set in, whispering over them for secrets like callouses and clean nails had revealed from his sister.

This one had a strong face, but the bruises on his knuckles found partners with the old dark stains painting the side of his mouth, straight chin tarnished with yellow patches where older blows had healed. His hair had a similar curl to his sister's black locks, except tighter and close like ringlets across the top of his head. Eighteen and weeks away from escaping school into the world beyond enchantments and walls. The headmistress had called this a safe haven, but if he let his fingers wander Feliciano was afraid to find more bruises, more sore places and black marks on bloodless skin.

This one had been a fighter, so why had it come to this?

Maybe the answer was in the wand sleeve still pinned to a shallow chest crossed with Slytherin green and silver. He searched it, expecting the handle of a long wand, but when he pulled Feliciano found himself holding only a broken stub of black wood. A little more prying, and four pieces of shattered wand held together by the frayed grey remains of a dead phoenix feather came out and dangled from his hand.

Replacing the pieces with a fuller understanding, he unpinned the leather case. He would give this to the young man's father, looping the sister's chain around the notched edges of the abused wand sleeve before finding an old handkerchief stuffed in the pocket of his borrowed robes. Feliciano wrapped the mementos up together to keep them safe, slipped them back into the robe pocket, and replaced the sheet.

He needed a few more minutes to wipe the tears off his face where they'd flowed freely and stained the ugly blue velvet he'd pulled on in London, and then left to rejoin the others.

Italy and England were going to have a talk.
Oil prices, foreign investments, tariff changes, import taxes.

Global initiatives, international sponsorship, supreme councils, world summits.

There was an awful lot for Nations to keep busy doing without ever stepping foot through a magic portal or touching an enchanted piece of anything.

Sporting events, internal corruption, natural disasters, changes in leadership.

If a Nation wanted to, or they were particularly unfortunate, they could find centuries of work in the modern world without even bothering to bring magic into it. The Wizarding World, as a rule, was deceptively quiet. Magic folk simply didn't make up enough of the population to become a major chagrin: they were a minority made up of minority groups, independent from the systems which kept the rest of their neighbours alive and happy. Everything from sceptic systems to resource allocation: food, fuel, and transport, were entirely separate between muggle and wizard.

That was why it took England and Italy almost two months to come together again on the Hogwarts issue. And Arthur wasn't going to lie: part of that was his own refusal to talk about it.

"And I think that about wraps things up for today!" A conference in London went about as smoothly as their kind could expect, paperwork sliding into briefcases and friends standing up and stretching before hurrying to mingle and make small talk. Whatever their bosses expected to get done at world meetings, they all knew that the social aspect was where the real work happened between Nations.

"England!"

"Italy! You can't just leave your bag here!" For some strange reason, Arthur thought Italy rushed up to him to say something about his report on the Euro-rail line and the maintenance costs that had begun building up to support it. When Germany's gruff voice chased the Italian across the floor it was just part of another normal day, so Arthur almost didn't notice it when Italy grabbed his arm and made sure to get a good grip on him before looking back with a smile for his friend.

"It's too heavy! Why don't you carry it for me instead?"

"Don't be a child! Come here and clean your space at once!" Of course, much like Greece and a few other nations at the table, Italy's seat was pushed back where he'd jumped up in a hurry, and his documents and paperwork were still scattered around with a few pens and a coffee cup resting on top of the mess.

"England and I have something important to discuss first!" It wasn't unusual for Italy and Germany to butt heads anymore. It never escalated very far, but the childish back-and-forth was customary. What was different was Italy using a third party to get his way. "Something magical! But very serious. Did you want to join us, Germany? You have to prepare a UN report on the Status of Education soon, so why not include a section on Wizarding schools and standards of safety and care?"

Germany's square face balked at once, wide shoulders shrugging and squirming under the grey panes of his suit as he lifted his hands and made up some sort of rambling excuse. Arthur wasn't listening anymore because at his final point, Italy had begun digging his fingertips down fiercely into his arm to make his meaning pristine: the last few weeks hadn't changed how he felt about the Hogwarts incident, and he didn't want Arthur wriggling his way out of a thorough discussion.
"I'll leave you two to talk then." And Germany was absolutely no help, because the bare utterance of 'magic' sent him hurrying off to do anything else. Even after he was gone, Italy's grip didn't loosen up.

"Actually, there really is something I need from my desk!"

"You don't need to be so two-faced about it." Arthur grunted, letting himself be dragged along by his hostage arm back around the wide table. Italy only released him to start stacking papers and cleaning up as Germany had wanted, a smile fixed to his face and eyes cinched shut to make the expression stick a little longer. "I know you're upset, so-"

"Mm! Yes, so is there someplace private where we can talk?" He didn't pick up everything, just whatever he thought he'd need before turning back around and snatching Arthur's wrist back up in one cold, hard hand. Nations were filtering out of the board room now, but there were always the ones who liked to linger and they were the ones Italy probably wanted to avoid.

"This way..."

Another meeting room on the same floor, significantly smaller, and vacant for at least the next two hours if the chart on the wall meant anything. The door wasn't locked as Arthur shuffled inside with Italy hounding him closely, but the other Nation did turn around and fiddle with the handle until it gave a tell-tale click of a settled lock. Wonderful.

"Have a seat, England."

"Italy-"

The laptop bag Italy was carrying was the same one from his last trip to London, and the top zipper was still undone from his fast clean-up in the other room. When he reached inside there was the loud slap of paper hitting the table next to them, but his arm moved so fast to put it there that Arthur barely saw the blur, just felt the wind hit his face from the blow.

"They're gone." Italy really was angry, not even speaking could disrupt his smile.

On the table was a folded newspaper, an utterly useless thing to carry around to a meeting- until Arthur saw the picture on the front page start moving. His eyes bungled the name of the paper and the article underneath it, confused for a moment by looping Italian script that only formed shadows of words he already knew.

A rough translation of borrowed words told him what Italy was trying to say: the Rosetti family line had collapsed. The details were hidden in words he'd need too long to sit down and properly read to himself, but there on the front page were several photos of smiling wizards and witches, a family with generations of magic and gold to them, crowned by two bright young children sitting front and centre, brother and sister, whom Arthur had seen buried a month earlier in Florence.

"Feliciano, I-"

"Do you know what happened yet?" Arthur wasn't sure what he'd been trying to say, but Italy was still smiling and both of them were standing perfectly still across from each other. He wished Italy had asked a different question.

"It was suicide, Italy, I'm sorry."

"Do you need me to pull up the numbers on young adults who commit suicide just weeks before graduating from school?"
"Italy-

"He was a solid student, you sent me his Hogwarts transcripts yourself: he was going to graduate."

"Yes, but-

"How often do children take their own lives when they have family living in the same school house? I understand bullying, Arthur, but don't be ridiculous."

"It was a tragedy, Italy! Suicide is always a tragedy, the entire school was shaken by it, but I don't know what you expect me to do about it!"

"You can tell me who he was fighting with." He was still smiling and damn it if Arthur didn't find it a little creepy when Italy was suddenly that much closer to him. "Tell me why she scratched her own face until she bled."

"The students won't talk about it." Arthur hated admitting it, but he also knew how dangerously close to losing his temper Italy had to be to start acting like this. He wasn't supposed to be aggressive, he was one Nation the rest of them could always count on to make the argument for peace. "I mean it. You left to escort the bodies home to their family and I stayed behind until the end of semester: the students wouldn't say a word to me or their professors. Slytherin house especially, and the most I got out of the other three were snide looks and no real remorse at all."

"You just said the entire school was shaken."

"They were... for a while."

Italy opened his eyes and he quietly put his smile down. He didn't glare or rage, he just looked at Arthur and stared straight at him until they were looking through each other. It was not a kind moment, and the feeling matched the way Italy spoke to him after collecting his thoughts.

"Hogwarts spawned one of the most terrible wizards of this age."

"Yes... yes it did."

"He came from Syltherin house."

"He did..." And he'd followed its founder's ideals far beyond what Salazar Syltherin himself had ever conceived. To bar muggle-born students because of the threat their muggle families posed to the magical world and the immense trust that had to be placed in people who weren't even magical, just related to those who were.

"The same house where two of mine took their lives."

"That's right."

"Lives no one else in that school is mourning?"

Arthur didn't answer that time, he was afraid to admit that- that he was afraid to admit something at all. He didn't like being intimidated by something Italy had to say, he found himself suddenly chaffing against the awkward hold the other Nation had him in, brown eyes unblinking when a few minutes before he'd refused to open them. When Arthur continued to stand there in silence, it just riled Italy up a little bit more.

"I want Hogwarts' international status revoked."
"What!?"

"Either it happened because they were Slytherins or it happened because they were Italian. I won't see another ounce of Italian gold enter Hogwarts coffers until I have an answer!"

"You're being unreasonable-" He wished he hadn't said that, because Italy's temper burst:

"I won't let another one of my children die because your school is full of black magic!" One flimsy door wasn't going to keep Italy's voice locked up when he shouted, one threatening hand raised and pointing straight at Arthur. "I lost enough of them during your awful war! That school is dangerous, there's no heart left in it if its own students can kill themselves and there isn't a single friend left behind to tell their parents what happened or why! I want Hogwarts blacklisted from the Triwizard Tournament and its international Quidditch funding suspended! You put children in robes that turn three quarters of their own school against them, and then teach them to keep secrets from their own nation! Is there even such a thing as an English wizard anymore, or do you just have wizards who happen to live in England?"

"That's enough!" How dare he! "If you think it's so easy to get a bunch of moody teenagers to talk then I'd like to see you try! Why don't you just enroll yourself in the damned school and see how far that gets you!"

"And see first-hand just what kind of hate you're breeding on that mountain?" Italy hissed back, his volume falling back to a normal level as his anger, harsh and loud, was either burning itself out or just slowly sinking back down into whatever smouldering pit he stored it in. "I'd do it just to prove I care more than you do."

"Don't delude yourself." Italy stepped away from him, not because he was intimidated but just to give them both space to breathe again. "I'm not going to just sit by and watch you dismantle a legacy like that for no reason."

"Dead children, England." He bit back, and Arthur wanted to grind his teeth at the reminder. "I don't need a better reason than that."

They parted in an unkind way.

Summer was ticking by, day by day without anything to show for it. The most Feliciano could do by the end of another hot week in Rome was try to get his brother to look at him again.

"Lovino-"

"Look, if you want to do it then do it." He'd talk, there was no problem getting South Italy to talk, but where he was standing in their kitchen slicing vegetables for a summer meal, he wouldn't turn around and look at him. "I get why, and frankly if I thought I could do anything about it then I'd probably be just as pissed off as you, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna like it."

"I don't want this to be a thing between us."

"You've been re-reading those creepy books again, and I know you went down into Wizarding Rome last week to have a look around: I'm not mad, I just don't like it."

"What happens if we leave it alone and the same things start happening all over again?" The knife in Romano's hands slowed down until the cutting edge just stopped against the wooden board, the
spring onions he'd been chopping just sitting there with the steel stuck half-way through them. "I went and had a talk with Vatican yesterday too; I know he has the same reservations you do."

"You weren't here when they started setting fires, Feliciano." South Italy just wouldn't look at him, he finished his cut and put the knife down, but standing there in an office shirt and slacks, Feliciano just watched his brother lean over the counter without trying to face him. "Water resistant, wind resistant, they just burned and burned until the entire wizarding quarter was gone, and then they vanished through the smoke threatening to destroy the rest of the city."

"Lovino..." The silence was heavy, but it was the kind of quiet that was only deep, not long.

"I can't handle getting involved with their kind anymore, I won't watch the rest of our people get caught in the middle again." Romano stood a little straighter after letting his head hang for a moment, and with his eyes set on what he was doing he scooped the onions up and dropped them in a hot skillet waiting on the stove next to him. They sizzled and were followed by mushrooms and garlic, the leafy greens for the salad he'd already been working on coming back under the knife so he could place the slices in a bowl for mixing. "But you're right. If England and Scotland can't control whatever's going on in that school then it's time for the international school to step in. It's America's anti-terrorism plans applied to the magical world, if you know there's black magic starting up somewhere then crush it. Investigate and fix the problems yourself, or just close the damned school. Just do something."

"I'll try and talk to England again about all of this." But while he was home for a break in between conferences, Feliciano still wanted his brother to just look at him...

"Just do something. Do something before... we all get burned again."

Arthur didn't expect to see Italy come back to London so soon after their last encounter. He was also surprised when his Italian counterpart was simply standing there on his doorstep in the late summer rain, hands in the pockets of another fine suit, a black leather suitcase sitting on the curb next to him. He had his eyes down and didn't look up as boldly as he had a few weeks before, but while standing there and letting the rain come down on him, Italy spoke first.

"You said the students at that school wouldn't talk to you." This again...

"They wouldn't say anything to anyone, it's like they'd all been hexed."

"What about each other then? Within their own houses, their friends?" It really meant this much to him, didn't it? It really was this frightening to imagine what should have been one of the safest wizarding schools in the world slowly collapsing in on itself and surrendering to a recent past of cruelty and darkness... "England, what if I really did go to Hogwarts?"

It was the last thing Arthur expected to hear when Italy looked up at him again. It was... almost ridiculous.

"As a student?"

"As a student." And then he shrugged, as if admitted how stupid he knew the idea sounded. "Age charms aren't so difficult and it's not very hard to write up paperwork for myself: I do it for drivers' licences and stuff every few years anyways."

"I'd tell you it's a seven year commitment you're making- unless you're going to drop out!"
"As long as it means finding the answers I need? I can't let this go, England, I just can't."

The silence this time was different from that angry board-room meeting. No screaming, and they weren't both clutching their tempers like it was their last chance at remaining civil. It must have been an impossible effort for Italy to keep his head up and look at him, because his eyes fell all over again and England was left standing there watching the rain drip off the other Nation's wet, curling red hair.

"Come inside first. I'll make us some tea."

"I just can't let it go."

And that meant they were going to figure something out instead.

Somewhere not so far away, Arthur was sure, his older brother Scotland got a chill down his spine and took a moment to hiss 'You god-damned idiot!' under his breath before carrying on with his day.

Because Arthur really was an idiot, and so was Italy, because at the end of two long days sitting and discussing and trying to work out what in the world they were going to do about the Hogwarts issue, they wound up back at the same answer Italy had brought to his doorstep.

"Enroll? Us? As Hogwarts students?"

It was absolutely insane but after so many hours of discussion, it became sensible: it could, conceivably, be done.

"I'm not asking you to come with me," and Italy wasn't being completely horrible or unreasonable about it either, but that didn't mean Arthur was happy to agree with him. "I have Romano to watch and manage things at home, and in his own way this means as much to him as it does to me."

"You understand that you can't just drop into fifth year at a school like this, whatever charm you wear will have to take you back all the way to an eleven-year-old child."

"You're forgetting how long I was an eight-year-old child, England." Not a kind thing to hear Italy say as he sipped afternoon tea and helped himself to a biscuit from the little store-bought tin resting on Arthur's coffee table.

"We'd have to create a second identity for you so my ministry could file all the correct paperwork." He argued.

"Magical or not, your people are so fussy with their bureaucracy." And Arthur was willing to exploit that to discourage Italy from doing this. Rules, restrictions, traditions, expectations:

"You won't be able to just pop off to Rome for an afternoon!"

"England, I know." But there was one thing Arthur had forgotten.

"It's a seven year commitment, six at the absolute least and-"

"Then close the school." It was that Italy had a cause he was fighting for, something he didn't get his hands on very often and it made his pliant personality wear away when rubbed too hard. "You're so against another nation seeing what goes on in that place: what are you hiding?"
He wasn't hiding anything, and that was why Arthur couldn't jump up and yell at Italy to just go home and mind his own magical business. He wasn't going to make himself look suspicious. Hogwarts was supposed to be one of the safest places in the wizarding world and Italy's challenges made him look inside for a moment and ask himself: what was he afraid of? A little bit of bullying? Italy could handle a hazing or two, or if he couldn't then he'd go home in tears and cry to his brother.

And having North Italy politically out of the picture, or at least drastically side-lined for the next seven years, would take his voice off the councils and out of the meeting rooms. South Italy wasn't nearly as difficult to discourage or influence. Wasn't this a good thing so long as England could control the situation how he liked?

It was hard to swallow the urge to exploit the situation like that, and if it hadn't been Hogwarts at the centre of things Arthur probably wouldn't have been able to keep up his arguments. And more importantly: he wouldn't have been able to stop the words that came out of his mouth next:

"I'm going with you then." What if something was wrong at the school? What if Italy came back after only a year or two with a magical report that shattered Arthur's expectations and brought serious questions against the school's administration? Hogwarts had almost closed its doors at least three times during the last Wizarding War, Arthur didn't know what he'd do if the same threat rose again in what was supposed to be an era of peace.

"It would be a lot more fun if you did!" And agreement brought Italy's dorky smile back to his face for the first time in days. "It would be really nice having someone who knows who I am in the walls with me."

"You're going to hate the food."

"See, now why did you have to go and ruin everything by saying something like that?"

He didn't want to pretend he was completely on board with the idea, or that he knew how he was going to split his responsibilities up between his brothers so when he finally came home Arthur would still have his position and authority intact. But Arthur was a good host until Italy left for his flight back to Rome, and then with much complaining and sighing, Arthur returned to his magical basement and did a little cleaning up.

Spells made chores much easier: one for the dusty shelves, another for the grimy floor. All the potions materials back in their places, textbooks lifted up and aligned in orderly rows on shelves reinforced with a bit of enchanted glue and a few planks of transfigured wood for strength. His wizarding wardrobe came out dancing, parading around the downstairs tables and shaking off dust and wrinkles before returning neatly to their refreshed hangers and shelves with pristine folds.

While the clean-up happened, Arthur himself was drafting a letter with a quill and ink well, scratching at thick wizarding parchment that almost broke under the sharp nib of the feather. When he was finished with a clean draft of the same letter, he turned around and was staring at nothing but an empty cage.

Of course.

It took Floo powder and a great deal of walking to deliver the letter himself, the idea of going to Diagon alley to buy a new owl crossing his mind before Arthur scolded himself for being frivolous. He couldn't invest in the life of an animal on a whim, and a little bit of walking around London was good for him.

What was even better was the letter already waiting for him in his mail slot when he returned home,
enchanted parchment bearing Hogwarts' seal on the front and signed with a familiar flourish. Minerva McGonagall's sweeping hand had left behind only a simple message on the inside:

"Come at once, there is much to discuss."

Feliciano had forgotten when exactly semesters began at Hogwarts's school, and he'd also fallen completely out of habit with letters by owl.

"I get that you're leaving, but keep those damned things out of our house!" Romano was not impressed. The first owl had been pure white and very quiet, arriving a few days after Feliciano returned home. But the way it had found its way into the house nearly gave both halves of Italy a heart-attack when they came home from work and heard a gentle cooing in their living room.

"Don't feed it!" Headmistress McGonagall's owl acted a lot like the phrasing in the letter sounded, stately and reserved, but at the same time quiet aware of how it wasn't really welcome to take the bread and a few slices of meat Feliciano offered it.

The letter itself had a similar quality of nobility, but when he actually read it, Feliciano could feel the regret saturating the words.

"Mister Kirkland has made the situation extremely clear to our institute. The affront shown to the Italian Wizarding community will be corrected for under my administration." It felt wrong to defer an old witch's retirement plans, but Feliciano couldn't help but feel some of the stress knotted up in his chest finally untangle itself. The Headmistress knew what was happening, and she made it clear from her letter that the rest of the staff weren't going to be informed of the decision: they didn't need the professors treating him differently.

The next owl to come along was a great big brown bird that almost bashed its way through their kitchen window when they were both standing by the stove cooking away at their dinner. It arrived with a heavy bundle of parchment from the English Ministry of Magic that Feliciano took the next day down to the Italian Ministry to have them sort through the sheets and sheets of requests and paperwork. The magical equivalent of a student visa was drafted for him that day by a confused little witch with a cute button nose and gold hair spun in rings around her ears.

After that, there was only one more major conference for Feliciano to prepare for in Paris, and both he and his brother understood that they'd part ways in France's capital for at least the next four months.

"I'll be back for Christmas, and you can still send me things via owl."

"This is still one of the worst ideas you've ever had, Veneziano." The flight to Paris was short and simple compared to longer trips like Beijing or Sydney. Feliciano told himself to savour having everything be adult-sized as he tried enjoying one more taste of Italian wine. "When I said investigate I meant go as a fucking professor or just slink around the god damned castle as a guest, not enroll."

"If you aren't careful, Lovino, people will think you're jealous." He also tried to get Romano to speak to him as much as possible. His brother still had a hard time looking him in the eye when reminded of all this Hogwarts business, but he wanted as much fast, fluent Italian as he could get before being shipped off to Scotland.

"Fuck off!" If only his brother would find more creative things to say.
The conference went as well as could be expected. The Italian President and Prime Minister both knew Feliciano would be taking a very long leave of absence for work reasons, and Germany had argued with him several times already about what could possibly be important enough to drag him away from work for what could be years, but the formal announcement was made at lunch on the third day of banking talks and industry quotas.

England looked like he'd swallowed a brick when Feliciano tried to politely thank Scotland for also agreeing, because France's grin was criminal.

"You're going to pose as children?" for the final two days, France followed them around everywhere. "Two cute, tiny little children? Or as I should say: one cute child, and one fuzzy yellow caterpillar?"

"No one's inviting you!" England was as bad about teasing now as he'd been in the 14th century, which left Feliciano doubting he'd be able to handle going to a school for wizard children. "Stop grinning! Don't follow us around! I told you I'm not bringing you along now stuff it!"

"Hogwarts is an international school, my darling England." The way France leaned on the words made Feliciano turn away from Germany at dinner and watch the discussion, because before he got all the way around England was already looking at him.

The other nations knew part of why they were going: suspicions of dark magic and issues with student safety. But they thought this was a preventative stunt. Feliciano had decided weeks ago to be kind to the school's reputation for now: unless one of his neighbours picked up a copy of his magical community's national paper from the beginning of summer, none of them would know that this wasn't a prediction: it was a reaction.

"I'm curious where this will go." At least that was what Feliciano had assumed about the rest of Europe and certainly the world at large. But when Norway, as calm and aloof as ever, came up and took a few moments of his time to talk, North Italy started asking himself if he was right to assume that everyone had put away their wands after the last war. "Do keep us informed, Italy. Magic is awfully two-faced." Yes? It was? He just hadn't expected Norway to say as much before saying his goodbye and drifting away again.

"In what world do you offer to spend a year up in the Scottish highlands with nothing but English food?" But even if Austria didn't know about fresh graves and tortured families, he still felt compelled to point out that Feliciano was a strange person for the job. Why not Scotland and England? Why not Scotland and Wales? Why were the nations involved at all? "Whatever is going on at that school, Italy, take it seriously and be careful."

"Of course! Don't worry, everyone, I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun!" So Feliciano smiled at the encouragements and made sure to scoop them up like coins to fill his pockets, laughing with Spain about wizarding fashion and listening in on China and Japan softly reminisce about their own magical communities.

And for all his anger and intolerance around magic, Romano stuck next to him for the entire five days. On their last night before Feliciano was set to board a plane for London and in a week's time get on the train to Hogwarts, his older brother even made a point of leaving his own bed behind and intentionally taking up as much space on Feliciano's fine hotel mattress as possible.

"Don't say a single thing; just go the hell to sleep."

It was probably the nicest thing Romano had done since everything had begun with a burst of green smoke and a bumbling old wizard in England's office. That feeling even extended beyond the night,
because Feliciano woke up the next morning to something pawing at his shoulder and Romano stubbornly feigning sleep beside him.

"Hm?" He wasn't the kind to be instantly chatty right after being woken up, but he forced the words out as he cracked one eye open over smooth cotton sheets. "What are you doing here?" The pawing was followed by purring, and then the gentle touch of a tiny wet nose to his cheek to wake him the rest of the way up in the early glow of late summer sun. "I thought I told you to stay home...?"

Nations had pets, Wizards called them familiars, and Feliciano woke up to his soft white tabby cat giving a dozy purr despite the hotel barring animals of any kind. The fuzzy creature was tailless and clumsy, patches of brown over its head and back, the whiskers over one of its eyes curled and sticking out like it was trying to mimic the curl of red hair pressed against his pillow when Feliciano put his head back down and closed his eyes for a few more minutes of sleep. He knew his brother was rigid, which meant he was probably awake, so he didn't ask what role Romano had played in bringing the cat along and sneaking it into the hotel. He just wiggled a little bit closer and touched his forehead to Romano's back between his shoulder blades, warm and sleepy and ready to go home.

He hadn't known polenta was on the hotel menu, which meant it probably wasn't, so when their meal arrived at the room door Feliciano didn't make a huge fuss about Romano being so nice to him. He just enjoyed the kind of food he loved most from Venice and watched his brother pet the attention-loving cat with one hand while trying to sneak as much sugar into his yellow cornmeal as possible.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" It was a bad idea to ask something like that, but North Italy watched South Italy closely as he said the words, trying to make sure he captured his brother's entire nervous reaction. "I'll only be a letter away, I promise."

"Shut up, I've been on my own before." Romano actually looked at him when he said it, his gaze wavering a little bit but holding on as he forced the connection. "And I already had a talk with that stupid potato you call a friend: he's going to send me the new numbers for that educational package you two have been working on."

"So, you're sure you're okay?" South Italy didn't answer, he was watching his bowl. "Lovino."

"I don't have anything new to say, Veneziano: just open your fucking suitcase." Confused, he did exactly what his brother said.

"Oh my god! These are tiny!" Whatever work Romano had done to sneak his cat and a carrier into the hotel, he'd also taken the liberty of swapping Feliciano's wardrobe for a similar style in less than half the size.

"You're the idiot trusting England to shrink you down, you get what you fucking get."

"I could have just bought new clothes in London you know!"

"I'm not sending my brother to a Scottish school wearing English clothes! Say something like that again and I'll set your cat on fire!"

"Wait, did you...?" It took until Feliciano was actually touching the shirts before he noticed something: a faded stain on a blue tie, and then the exact same suit jacket he'd worn yesterday during Russia's presentation in a child's size. Stunned, he looked back at Romano and saw his brother sitting there like he'd stapled a wooden plank to his back for support. "You did!"

"Your wand is an evil thing." Romano's voice was too defensive to be insulting.

"You said you forgot how!"
“You kept leaving the fucking how-to book open in the living room!”

It was a wonderful morning that Feliciano didn’t want to see come to an end.

Which was what made it all the more impossible, three hours later, when instead of boarding the same plane as his brother to take them back to Rome: North Italy found himself sitting next to England with a wax-sealed letter in his hands, signed by Deputy Headmaster Flitwick, welcoming him to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

And saying goodbye like that changed things a little bit more than he may have ever wanted.
"The train leaves in three days." Which meant they hadn't given each other very much time to finish their preparations. Most students at Hogwarts had half the summer to prepare: to purchase and pack all of their supplies, get started on their reading, and do whatever else last minute preparations always cropped up when least wanted or expected.

In the case of Arthur Kirkland and Feliciano Vargas, the biggest hurdle was shrinking both of them down from adults back to eleven year old boys. It was one of the few times having a magical family did in fact come in handy, because Scotland was also in London to help them.

"I said don't move!" But it still took them over half a week come the end of the Paris conference to get it right.

"Well if you'd stop jabbing me with that bloody stick then-"

"You know, you two are worse than Romano and I!"

Polyjuice potion was a terrible idea, if only because there would be no subtle way for two first year students to slip away to drink a fresh dose every few hours or to keep replenishing their supply. Hexing or cursing them both to simply stay small also wasn't going to work because Arthur had already been experimenting.

A curse was manageable, but they tended to be difficult to break and uncomfortable to live with: a curse was black magic, closer to grey, but they never felt right and there would always be this lingering sense of unease about them when you were afflicted.

The very best answer that England and Scotland had come up with was a charmed talisman. It didn't honestly matter what the talisman was either, as long as they didn't take it off. Arthur chose a wrist watch with a water-proof seal, and when they told Italy to choose something he easily pulled a simple catholic cross on a silver chain out of his pocket.

"That's-!" At least it was simple until Arthur got a proper look at the silver body and its tiny crystals

"It's a good reminder of why we're doing this." The dead girl's silver chain was placed in a ring of salt and dried herbs on one of Arthur's downstairs tables. It took a drop of blood to bind the cross to Italy, and when he fetched his wand from his suitcase Arthur finished placing a bead of his own blood on the backside of his watch's clockface.

"I'd rather finish off England's charm first, if you don't mind, Italy." Scotland was taller than Arthur, his hair a deep, dark mixture of red and brown that looked like it gave up its fiery shine in the dim shadows of the basement. The two of them had the same long nose, but he knew Scotland's thicker build made him appear wider and heavier to match his height. He'd decided not to shave again since the end of the Paris conference, wearing the beginnings of a scratchy red beard down his face and chin as he held a hawthorn wand in his hand and waved Italy to come closer and help lend his strength to the casting.

"It's a physical charm, not a mental one. Thankfully, people like us are pliable when it comes to that." Thick Scottish words and a practice wave of their wands to make sure the three of them moved in unison, and then with one last nod to confirm that Scotland would be the one to actually say the spell, they cast as one.

Arthur didn't really hear what was said, with the steady swoop and rise of the wand points a deep
sound filled his ears and rumbled through the floor at his feet. Earth became air and a gust of wind swept up from the stones and coiled right around him, wrapping over his shoulders and filling his ears until they almost burst. He had to close his eyes to stay focused on the warmth running down his arm, out through his fingertips, and along the oak length of his wand before it turned into a ribbon of gold light that ebbed and flowed in his mind's eye to tangle around the watch and soak into the ticking pieces, the leather wrist-band, and the silver engraving on the back where a bead of national blood had soaked in to stain the metal.

It was exhilarating and suddenly exhausting, but when Scotland tied off the spell and brought it to an end, Arthur felt rather light-headed before sitting down slowly on a chair conjured up to come closer.

"Alright..." Scotland was tapping the watch with his wand, bouncing the knobby tip against the glass face a few times until Arthur recognized a simple resistance charm in case it was dropped. Another easy charm followed to keep water from getting into the gears, and probably another one on top of that just to explain away why a young wizard would be wearing a muggle watch to school. "Give it a try, squirt. It ought to work just from holding it in your hand."

There was a strange anxiety around picking the watch up from the table: the salt and herbs were all gone, either blasted away by the wind Arthur had felt or evaporated by the magic itself. His magical senses were more awake now than they'd been in years, resonating with the enchantments set to go off at his touch alone before he finally made a grab for the watch and picked it up.

It felt like someone Scotland's size suddenly booted him in the gut. Arthur doubled over as his eyes went cross, nausea grabbing his stomach and squeezing so hard he felt one knee buckle and hit the floor. Nobody touched him, but there were footsteps and voices before he was left kneeling on the hard stones in clothes much too large and his head suddenly so far away from the table.

"Alright, stand up and let's get a look at ya."

"Give me a damned mi-" He'd meant to say more but immediately coughed, head jerking up as his ears rejected the high, narrow little voice that came out of his throat. Arthur had a hand around his own neck and rubbed the skin there, his fingers immediately awkward with the soft skin as he moved his own touch and used both hands to touch his cheeks. Absolutely bare, soft and utterly wrong for someone who'd been shaving on and off for the last nine centuries.

"Bloody hell!"

His voice was terrible: he sounded like a little girl! Standing up was a fight with trousers that barely hung on around his chest, nevermind his waist. His shoes were like buckets swallowing his ankles and it was a desperate thing to get his arms out of too many sleeves so he could hoist the back-end of his trousers up as he stood. It was offensive to find the table next to him at chest-height instead of down where it belonged for easy reach, and when Scotland handed his wand back to him Arthur caught Italy grinning behind one stupid hand.

"Don't you dare laugh!" The wrong voice hissed at him. "You're next, and don't forget that this was your idea to begin with!"

"This is why France called you a-"

"Say it and I'll hex you right now!"

"No, you won't." Scotland dared to scold him and Arthur looked up with what he hoped was a scorching glare. "You registered yourself with the ministry for this stunt, boy, any underage magic and you'll be in danger of having your wand snapped."
"They wouldn't dare!" He argued back, but when his brother only shrugged and made a big show of nodding his head from side to side, he understood just what sort of mess he'd dragged himself into.

"You could always try and find out, but I'd double-check that letter Flitwick sent before getting my hopes up. Make sure the watch fits."

"It fits just fine!" He might need to drill another hole through the leather now that his wrists were so skinny, but Arthur clipped it into place and let Scotland tap it with his wand again, making the modification he'd just been thinking about without comment.

"Now take it off and let's make sure the magic'll release you if you need it to."

It was the exact same terrible feeling when Arthur let the watch leave his hand and set it on the table. This time it felt like a blow to the back of the head that made his eyes black out for a second or two, his spine twisting as it felt like he was about to heave without having anything in his stomach. His clothes didn't magically arrange themselves either, stitches popping and folds getting stuck under his arms while his shoes pinched feet that weren't sitting properly in his socks anymore. By the time he could see again and was back at his proper height with the frog out of his throat, he felt like someone had just tumbled him in a dryer for half an hour.

"Bloody awful," he shuddered, telling himself this was already more trouble than it was worth.

When they turned around and performed the same charm on Italy's cross this time, Arthur watched him for the same feeling of being blown away as an enchanted whirlwind pulled violently at Italy's clothes without touching Arthur or Scotland again. The red light that came streaming out of his wand's crooked tip left him visibly drained before it was done, but he seemed happy enough to reach for the silver cross and perform the same check Arthur had already done.

They gave off light during the transformation. A shower of red sparks began falling from the crown of Italy's head before his face twisted like he was on a rollercoaster and wanted off right now. He coughed more of the same fairy lights and then doubled over the way Arthur had nearly collapsed, and he just kept falling until it was clear he was physically getting smaller and not literally about to pass out on the floor.

"Ve..." A tiny squeak from the small child who tipped over in an oversized white shirt and loose tie. Italy looked like he'd just been roused from a nap as his lean face had softened back into rounded cheeks and the long bridge of his straight nose melted back into his skin and the softness between his eyes. "Did it work? Am I cute at least?"

"Cute perhaps, but I don't know if you look quite eleven." Scotland answered. "Stand up for a minute." He looked more like he was eight or nine, but even as Arthur watched Italy flounder about trying to stand back up bare-foot on the stone floor, he couldn't really remember ever seeing him at an age between a small child and a proper teenager.

The poking and tapping started again from Scotland's wand, a couple questions falling off his brother's lips as Italy answered in short spurts of yeses, no's and maybes. His legs were lengthened a little and Scotland tapped him three times under the chin to chase away a little more baby-fat, quickly making sure his hands didn't have any callouses. Nations had scars usually, and with those in mind Italy was asked to keep the cross on but wiggle his way out of the white shirt, his fingers fighting with the buttons until he got it off and a few more wand taps dealt with faded marks across his shoulders and back.

"There, much better."
"This is still an awful idea." Arthur growled.

"You shut up and go get yer money from upstairs." But Scotland was gruffer than him. "I tried buying your first year books for you before we went off to Paris, but the pesky shop keeper wouldn't hand them over without both your letters. We'd better get it done before they're all gone." Last minute shopping at its finest then. Arthur was just about to do as Scotland suggested and go to find a set of robes for himself when he was called right back. His brother was pointing at the watch on the table.

"You can't be serious!"

"You're better off wearing the charm into Diagon Alley: what if you meet one of your professors, or fellow students, hmm?"

"No one would recognize us!" Italy didn't seem thrilled with the idea either, but he stood there without trying to take the chain off where it was hanging half-way down his skinny chest.

"How long d'you think it'll take you two to start acting like kids again?" Scotland challenged, and Arthur tried not to groan. "You can't buy things for yourself or go talkin' to adults as equals, you're a hell of a lot weaker now than you were ten minutes ago, and nothing's your size anymore. If you two treat the Hogwarts express like your normal morning commute, you'll get funny stares comin' out your asses."

"You want us to practice then?"

"Exactly. Now get your watch on, Arthur and then go get your money. I'm taking you to Diagon Alley but I'm not wasting my gold on either of you!"

"Ve, I changed about a thousand Euros before I left Rome. Should I put some of it in the English bank? Grinots?"

"Gringotts," Arthur corrected, staring glumly at the watch trying to fight off the nausea of putting it on again. "And that would for the best. You've already got a wand and your cat is upstairs shedding all over my furniture, so there's nothing to buy that you'd need that much money for." Books, robes, potion supplies, and whatever else was on their lists for first year…

The worst part about leaving the house with the enchantment fixed to his wrist was the fact that Arthur hadn't had a child in his care for centuries. Sealand didn't really count; he lived on his fort most of the time and usually took home whatever changes of clothes he brought to London to visit England in. Trying to dig up anything from Canada or New Zealand's colonial days would not only kick up more dust than they were worth, but be so pitifully out of style he wouldn't be able to handle even going through the noise and confusion of the magical shopping district.

Italy, somehow, was the one to suggest a shrinking charm for a simple tee-shirt and pair of jeans, not to mention trainers for Arthur to pull on that would actually fit. The first time Scotland called him by the name Feliciano, Italy almost jumped from the surprise.

"Don't tell me you didn't think about that." Being called by his personal name, not his national one, especially by people he wasn’t very close to.

"From humans, yes, I just didn't expect it from you!"

"Get used to it, Vargas!"

Arthur's personal credit card wound up in Scotland's hand, something that was awkward and
terrifying from Arthur's perspective as his wardrobe was replenished with tiny clothes from the children's section of a few small stores around London proper. When they finished muggle shopping for him and entered Diagon Alley through the Leaky Cauldron's back entryway, it was even worse letting his fingers release three fat gold galeons into his older brother's hand.

"Keep acting like I'm gonna steal it and maybe I will." And, of course, Scotland noticed his hesitation.

"Sorry..."

"You'll be sorry when Parliament's moved up to Edinburgh while you're gone."

"You so much as try it and I'll rip your beard off!"

There was no way to describe Arthur's endless frustration when instead of getting mad and snapping back at him, he watched Scotland choke on a laugh and say something awful to Italy about how impossible it was to take Arthur's voice seriously anymore.

Diagon Alley was two things to anyone who visited it: colour, and noise. London itself was vibrant and alive, but the Wizards District was so flamboyant that it was a shock to the eyes on a late summer afternoon to watch lime coloured robes and pointy pink hats chase squalling owls and duck under bright orange rafters. Lumpy cobbled stones wound back and forth along the curving street, the alley nearly doubling back on itself several times so it could fit twice as many shops as any muggle road elsewhere in the city.

There was no need for wands at Ollivander's thousand-year-old shop, although Italy did linger outside the dark window for several minutes while Arthur was stuck trying to remember if his cauldron at home was made of pewter or bronze.

"Are you coming or not?"

"Sorry, just daydreaming a little bit!"

Several times Arthur almost lost Italy completely in the flurry of Diagon Alley, mostly because he caught himself looking much too high for someone far too old to match the little red-haired child he was supposed to associate with Feliciano Vargas. As much as he'd already understood Scotland's emphasis on practicing proper behaviour, he finally agreed with it after he was not only nearly stepped on by one old wizard, but then had to stand obediently next to his older brother when a witch took Feliciano roughly by the arm and dragged him back over to the two of them. She scolded Scotland fiercely for almost letting him wander down Knockturn Alley, and then vanished in a huff of angry red velvet.

"For Christ's sake, boy, don't make me hold your hand." The scolding left its mark.

"All I saw were dragon kidneys in a vat, what's so terrible?"

"It's the Black Magic road, idiot." Arthur found it amusing once the witch bustled off that Scotland was still red with embarrassment and weighed down with potions supplies and two cauldrons. He settled in to explain things while his brother tried to get over his hazing by pulling out a midnight blue satchel with gold stars, talking while Scotland stuffed each item into the impossibly tiny bag for easy storage. "Surely they have one of those in Rome."

"That's all under-ground though! Florence's is the largest and they stay housed in the catacombs." Which was interesting, but Scotland almost cuffed both of them in the back of the head for saying it so loudly.
The next order of business was books, which resulted in another scolding for Scotland who looked absolutely fed up with all of this London nonsense as he used Italy and Arthur's money to buy the last two copies of each title on their school list.

"Two days before term? Well I wouldn't be buyin' 'em this late if someone'd just sold them to me in the first place!" Two sets of books were crammed into the same expandable bag, and when Arthur felt his attention go side-ways on their way past the broomstick shop he felt his brother get a grip on the back of his collar and hoist him in a hurry to come along. "Gringotts and then I swear I'm getting a drink!"

Gringotts was a simple matter of waiting in one line, explaining that they were there to open an account, taking a small pearl from a jar full of assorted gemstones, and sitting and waiting for an hour while hoping for the thing to change colour in a hall full of noisy goblins.

By the end of it, Arthur was exhausted for what he deemed was no good reason, Italy had spent most of the time napping, and if Scotland had to watch one more wizard or witch in strange robes come after them and be served before them, he was going to cause an absolute scene.

"We could have just dug a hole in your rose garden and buried the lot!" Italy actually looked like he agreed with Scotland, because by the time they left the massive white tower of Gringotts bank, the sun was long gone over London, all three of them were starving, and Italy was falling asleep on his feet.

"I'm so tired..." He complained, and not in his usual over-done whine either. He really meant it this time. "I don't get it... A little bit of shopping...?" Arthur agreed with him. While Italy almost fell over while stumbling to walk, Arthur was having an impossible time trying to see straight.

"You're eleven." The crowds in the alley were mostly gone as the trudged slowly back the way they'd come. The different coloured shops were glittering with candles and lanterns now, and not all of them burnt the same colour: violets and fuchsias, greens and the occasional blue ghost lights all glittering off the odd cobble made of gold or bronze. It was frustrating to be so tired and have every step only carry him half as far as Scotland's easy gait. His brother even kept stopping and waiting for the two of them to catch up. "Whatever you're background, you're only boys now."

"So if we take it off, we'll feel better?" Italy barely got the words to come out, and Arthur swallowed his pride when he felt his hand and arm being taken up in his brother's warm grasp.

"That won't be an option later, so just get used to it now." Easier said... than done...

From Muggle London they took a taxi somewhere that wasn't Arthur's townhouse, and for about twenty minutes that evening Scotland vanished from the little Italian restaurant where he left them. Italy lost his ability to hold onto his English for a while with the waitress who came over and kindly offered him a children's menu, laughing when he must have said something about wine in between deep yawns and accepting a plate of pasta that Arthur didn't know the name of.

Scotland came back with nothing to show for it, and he had the audacity to pay for their meals with Arthur's credit card.

The next two days were devoted to reading and more 'practice' outings before finally, at long bloody last: Hogwarts.

Platform 9 3/4s.
"Will you shut up about it!"

The irony was too much for Italy to let England get away with. England, perfectly logical and all about time-tables and appointments. England who had a form for every query and a time and date-stamp on every printed box. England who expected his post to arrive at the exact same minute every day (except Sunday, because there was no post on Sundays), all his trains set to rigid schedules...

That same England let his Wizarding community have a platform nine and three quarters.

"You couldn't have just given them the thirteenth?" The teasing started as they were leaving the house and continued until they were already at King's Cross station in London. England's temper was worth razing when his youthful face had no way to control the furious red blush creeping up his neck, flashing over his ears, and leaving him white-lipped and on the verge of whipping around and punching Feliciano in the face.

Without their respective charms in place, Feliciano might have been afraid of that punch, but it was a lot like teasing Germany: no matter how angry England got, he either wouldn't have the heart to hurt him or he'd try and get stopped by someone else. Someone like Scotland.

"Alright, we're here. Now get on with it I don't want a scene." Sadly, Scotland only brought them as far as the platform itself. He traded one last bit of snark with England about work matters, said goodbye, and before Feliciano could turn around and answer him the other nation was gone.

"He doesn't want to be recognized; you know." Their luggage was taken and stowed by a kindly old wizard wearing a blue conductor's suit whose white beard was parted and combed like a heart as he smiled and sent them on their way to the doors, whisking Gino's carrier away somewhere with the other animals. There was no one else to say goodbye to on the platform. Feliciano had said his farewells in Paris, England and Scotland were too proud for things like that. "I'm quite safe looking like this, but Scotland? There are veterans in this crowd."

"Like Potter?" Whose first name escaped him at the moment, but Feliciano knew he had the surname right.

The inside of the Hogwarts Express was a lot like any other train, if a bit wider on the inside than it should have been from the outside. Old carpets with nondescript patterns, beige walls, brass knobs on compartment doors- one of which shrieked when England tried opening it. The sound made both of them jump back before they heard teenage girls cackling behind the screen, and remembering that they were so small again when a pair of sixteen year old boys walked right over them. Feliciano found himself grabbing England's hand and restlessly searching the train car for any compartment that wasn't already full of students.

"Right then, let's go through everything one last time." Finding an abandoned one was a relief, and Feliciano was embarrassed by how hard it was to get up on the seat with his tiny legs. England
seemed to think he was in charge, but since there was nothing better to do except peer out the window at the crowded station platform, Feliciano sat up straighter and answered.

"My name is Feliciano Vargas from House Vargas in Rome. My older brother works for the Italian ministry and he thinks Hogwarts is a waste of time, but, your family thinks it's good for me to be here!"

"Yes, meanwhile... There's every reason to believe someone at Hogwarts will recognize the name Kirkland, so if I end up getting pressured about it at all I'll simply say I'm a foster of theirs."

"With the same first name as the one in London?" A little more teasing just to get further under England's skin, and the way his lips twisted and he tried to snarl across the compartment at him.

"Arthur is a fine English name. Good stock. Never met an Arthur I didn't like."

It only took about another ten minutes before the loud scream of a steam whistle signaled their departure. Feliciano watched the crowds fade away as the train heaved itself from the platform and began to chug along in a blur of city buildings and London sunlight that faded much faster than it probably should have.

England looked like he was about to ask a question when their compartment door suddenly rattled open, but then froze half-way through with a startled looking boy and girl standing out in the hall.

"Oh- sorry." The boy's hair looked like an absolute mess, maybe he'd forgotten to comb the black mop back into place when he woke up that morning, but the girl behind him had her long red locks neatly tied back behind her head. The boy was the one who'd opened the door, and he tried to close it without another word when the girl reached past him and held it open for a moment, poking her head in to get a look at them and asking the obvious question:

"May we come in? The whole train's positively bursting."

For whatever reason, Feliciano decided to take point from England, who was looking at him with the exact same expression. They were off to a good start then.

"Of course you can, my-" Maybe the kids didn't hear the tone England used, but Feliciano did and he jumped up right away, making sure to give England a good kick before he could call them darlings or dears. They were all supposed to be the same age, right? No room for grandfatherly greetings here.

"Ve! Come right in! More people means more fun!"

The children's names were Albus Potter and Rose Weasley. Only the first surname meant anything to Feliciano, but he couldn't help but stare at the girl trying to remember where he'd heard Weasley before.

Ah-! The old wizard from England's office?

"My brother James and our friend Teddy kicked us out of their compartment..." Albus had a quiet way about him, he didn't seem like he wanted to look up at any of them as he stared either out the window or at his hands in his lap. "They're both in second year, but they put a Gryffindor Only charm on the door."

"Gryffindor?" Feliciano repeated.

"One of the four houses." England explained, and that seemed to brighten the Weasley girl up all at
once. She was sitting next to Feliciano while Albus was across from him and next to England. She'd stared right at him every time Feliciano had spoken so far, but now finally came up with something to say to him.

"Where are you from, Feliciano?" Ah, the English accent was cute but it was making him regret a choice made almost two and a half thousand years ago. There was hard 'z' sound working its way into the middle of his name whenever any of England's children tried saying it properly. "Someplace far away, I imagine?"

"Si, I came from Roma!" All it took was a little bit of unnecessary Italian in his sentence to get England glaring at him. Feliciano making a face with his tongue out and fingers pulling at his eyes only made England's temper worsen until his face was completely red.

"Idiot."

"He doesn't like it when I speak in Italian." Feliciano snickered, kicking his feet where his legs were too short to reach the floor.

"No, I don't mind that!" Putting England on the defensive was so fun and easy sometimes, it was amazing he ever got anywhere at politics. "I mind you pretending you suddenly don't know your English anymore! Roma- honestly!"

Albus was laughing a little bit under his breath, opening up enough in his own way that Feliciano didn't feel like tearing into a linguistics debate he was sure he would win.

"Do you know about the four houses then?" Rose was good for bringing the conversation back around to her original point, and Feliciano was comfortable saying he couldn't remember anything except the names—bar one exception, of course.

"Slytherin seems interesting." This was the wrong thing to say. Albus and his cousin both flinched and made strange faces when he made the comment, the boy looked like something had set his stomach off, and the girl sniffed the air quietly like she could smell something foul.

"Slytherin's alright I suppose, but it's not exactly a nice place." Oh? "I mean, I don't know first-hand, but I remember what my mother and father always said about it."

"James says awful things about Slytherins... I heard two of them even died last year."

When the silence settled after Albus's softly spoken words, Feliciano looked around for the source of pain in his hand and found his own fingernails digging into his skin. England was watching him too, so he tried to put a good smile on his face and keep what he was feeling inside. He wanted to talk about why the cross under his shirt felt so cold against his skin, but not with children like these. He needed someone who had known them, not known of them.

"So, you two don't want to be in Slytherin then?" He asked.

"Our family has always been Gryffindor on both sides!" Rose declared cheerfully, tapping one long pale finger against her lips for a moment as she thought, rolling her eyes like she was remembering something silly and then admitting: "My dad will be so mad if I don't get into Gryffindor, but mum said Ravenclaw's a wonderful house too."

"Gryffindor, I hope...." Albus answered quietly, and England was nodding to him as if it was the only answer that made sense to the nation. Albus was the son of a famous hero, it wasn't that big a leap to make.
"What about you, Vargas?" He expected England to give his own answer first. They hadn't really talked about it before now; there had been too much to worry about just getting into the school at all, nevermind being sorted. "Put any thought into it?"

"Whichever one will help me protect what's most important, I guess." His answer was vague, but it felt right when he said it and his smile relaxed a little bit. The two children they'd apparently made friends with were happy with his answer too.

"That sounds like a very Gryffindorish thing to say." Rose applauded, and maybe she could already see the four of them dressed in the same red and gold robes.

England's laugh made both of them jump and look at him.

"Vargas's too cowardly for a house like that!"

"Ve~ you just have a short memory." Very short.

"You'd be better off in Hufflepuff, I think. Have you ever tried taking something from an angry badger?"

"You should be careful about saying things like that." Rose was a lot more talkative than her cousin, and Feliciano felt a worrying tingle when she seemed to jump on the defensive before England's badger comment really settled in. For her information, Feliciano had once seen someone take something from a badger, and Prussia had needed three days to grow his fingers back afterwards. "If you don't mind yourself you'll end up in Slytherin before you know it."

"So?" England had a more colourful response to make, Feliciano went for the bare minimum.

"Well he should..." And his rebuttal seemed to cause a break in Rose's mind, because she just blinked and stared at him like she didn't know what he'd just said. "He should just..."

The door saved her from answering by sliding open again, and this time there was another shocked young face waiting on the other side that panicked and tried to disappear before Rose found her voice again.

"Scorpius Malfoy?" The boy was short and very thin, his skin pale and tight like he'd forgotten that young children were usually softer and baby-ish. He looked almost terrified when his name was called and it was just another surname ringing bells in Feliciano's head. He knew that one too!

"Rose Weasley," but then he tried to escape again and Feliciano had a brilliant idea.

"Arthur Kirkland!" He shouted, England stared at him and the boy at the door was confused.

"Feli...ciano Vargas?" England stuttered back.

"And Albus Potter!" Albus looked like he wanted to crawl under his seat. They were all looking at Feliciano now, which was much better than having everyone stare at their shoes. "There, now that everybody's been introduced, why don't we play a game of something? Did you bring your chess set, Arthur?" Feliciano didn't even know if England owned one, so didn't wait for an answer because he'd already seen one. "Scorpius? Scorpius! That looks like a brand new board! I haven't played chess in so long, can I see yours? Come sit down!"

"Definitely Hufflepuff." England snickered under his breath, but then he got right on board with encouraging the painfully awkward children around them to at least let the new boy Scorpius sit down between Rose and Feliciano. He had a polished redwood chess-board in his lap, the case
opening up to show the velvet compartments for the white and black pieces on the reverse side of the actual board.

"My, um... My father gave it to me. And your name was...?" There were tense pauses and awkward glances for all, but Feliciano was more interested at poking the living pieces out of their places and listening to Scorpius tell him not to-

"Ow!"

"I just told you the white Knight has a temper!" and a tiny sword that was actually very sharp, which meant Feliciano sat out of the first round of chess so he could suck on the little cut next to his nail and wait for a chance to play with the black set instead. Each living piece was glossy and freshly enchanted, the weight of the resin making him rethink the material as England showed the other three how to randomly assign order with their wand tips all aglow, white or red to choose which piece set.

Going easy on the children was necessary, but not too easy- they weren't muggle children who had a million other games and electronics to keep them busy. Wizard's chess was still a staple pass-time in most magical households and England seemed baffled when Scorpius took his queen when the nation wasn't even looking.

Feliciano didn't do a good enough job covering his laughter as the white queen fainted and was dragged in distress across the board by a bishop and tossed to the floor. He sadly wore a shock of green hair on the front of his head for the next hour until England finally removed the curse he said he'd learned from a magazine clipping.

Rose destroyed Albus in only a few short moves and Feliciano let her chase him around the board for twenty minutes with England incessantly prodding him in the back with his wand to either end the game or just let her win. The nations avoided playing against each other, and Scorpius and Rose were still playing the final round of chess as the snack cart rolled by and the sky outside the train began to grow darker.

"All-in then, everybody pay the same amount and we'll see what we can get." A handful of bronze coins from Feliciano's pockets met the same number from everyone else, and some sweet chocolate frogs and stuffed pumpkin cakes were shared as awkwardly as the discarded chessboard had been. If the next six years were going to be this tense and awful, Feliciano was going to have to bully his brother into coming with him so he'd have someone to talk to that wasn't as stuffy as England.

Probably the brightest moment of the trip was when Albus groaned loudly from his side of the compartment, half a chocolate frog wriggling in his mouth, before he took the card from the candy wrapper and handed it to Rose so she could laugh at him.

"You always get Uncle Harry! I don't think you've ever found a single Dumbledore or Nicholas Flamel."

"What I really want is a Headmistress McGonagall." Feliciano could admit that his taste in sweets was limited and he didn't eat his entire share, but he was mimicking England and looking for the black school robe he'd bought and stuffed in a small backpack when he heard something even better come from Scorpius Malfoy.

"Do you want this one then? I- uh, I have two already."

Feliciano hadn't seen England looked so pleased in months, but he covered it up well by pretending there were wrinkles in his black robe that needed straightening out. When they felt the train beginning to slow down and the loud chatter of older students moving as shadows outside the
compartment door, the nerves from the three children felt like they started giving way to the giddy, terrifying excitement of a new adventure, and he was fine with fading into the background as they started talking a bit more and chattering with less anxiety about houses and families.

"Is it true that Professor Longbottom makes students climb the Whomping Willow in their first day?"

"I hope not! My father would never let me hear the end of it." Rose's next words made both her cousin and Scorpius wail out-loud:

"Uncle Harry once told me he and Professor Malfoy had detention in the Forbidden Forest." And that was where Feliciano had heard Scorpius' surname before. He shared a glance with England that tried to explain how he finally understood what everyone meant about England's Wizarding Elite all attending the same school.

"Ready, Vargas?"

"Hogwarts! Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! Next stop, Hogwarts!"

"Your robe's on backwards, Kirkland."
Housing Crisis

Watching Potters, Malfoys and Weasleys behave civilly for four hours on the train made Arthur's day and night complete. He was walking on clouds just thinking of the letter he'd send off to that idiot Scotland tomorrow and the sort of leap forward it would mean was taking place between the Pureblood families.

Granted yes, they were only eleven years old each of them, and they'd been supervised the entire time by two nations, but they'd still got along by the end of it.

They even traded frog cards by the end of it, because Albus Potter left the train with a Minerva McGonagall card in his robe pocket while they disembarked and followed the crowd looking for a sign of which way to go.

Arthur couldn't help himself, and by the looks of things neither could Italy. They both lingered a little ways behind, quick to snatch anyone else with all-black robes and help shuttle them along after the deep, throaty call of a distant figure carrying a lantern high over their heads to lead the first-years to their destination. When Arthur caught the smell of cold fresh water and dank wet earth, he knew what to expect when the lights began to multiply and the first years found themselves crowded against the water's edge.

"Swim?" Italy asked in a soft voice behind him, but a familiar voice had found them again and Rose Weasley said she could see something coming closer across the water. Arthur pushed Italy ahead to get him to choose a boat as the vessels ground up against the shore, not even sure if he wanted to go with him exactly before being pulled in by Italy, who turned to wave Rose and someone else to join them.

That someone else was Scorpius Malfoy, who Arthur scooted over to make room for on his narrow little bench in the rocking boat. He knew Italy was looking for paddles as their lamp flared a little brighter to say it was ready to move, so Arthur kicked one foot up to brace the other nation's back when the boat launched itself and nearly threw him off his seat.

"You really are a fool."

"Says you." What a perfect come-back for an eleven-year-old ninny. He was certainly playing the part well.

Their ride was completely silent after Rose hushed them with a finger over her pink lips. Her blue eyes were glowing sharply in the darkness that swallowed their boat and the ghost lights following it from the other vessels streaming across the water. Malfoy's eyes were positioned dead ahead, and Arthur looked up, straining to catch sight of something that became all too obvious a moment later.

Hogwarts, despite its atrocious name, was a majestic beast draped over the mountain's peak, golden windows blazing with light as the September air grew colder. The world of all-hour texts and impending meeting deadlines seemed to fall away under the curtain of enchantments that settled over them like a warm embrace, welcoming them home.

Or rather, welcoming him home until they realized England was not Scotland. There was a sting in the air that followed a few moments later, lingering on his skin before flaring up and burning itself out when the magic deemed him not a threat. Italy had a much harder run with it, a noise of pain escaping his nose as he doubled-over in the front seat for a few minutes until Weasley and Malfoy both noticed him.
He played it off as nausea from the boat, a ridiculous thing for the former Republic of Venice to try and use as an excuse. But eventually Hogwarts accepted his presence, suspicions raised to protect the school from invasion or foreign powers, but satisfied by the lack of ill intentions or black magic cloaking the other nation. By the time Italy seemed over the worst of it, they were drifting up to the lit stone platform at the base of the castle and the mountain, and he was able to get his balance with the same ease Arthur did and make the leap from boat to dock, both of them turning around to offer the other two passengers a hand.

They weren’t left waiting on the platform for very long. The very tiny form of the Deputy Headmaster soon formed from the crowd of waiting first years, but Arthur was surprised by how few of them there were: less than thirty new students for an entire year at Hogwarts? Maybe he would have to hold off on that letter to Scotland for just a little bit.

Flitwick was a man scarcely four feet tall and with a white mane of grey hair that left the top of his head bald and let his beard join the rest of it, golden spectacles sitting on the end of his long nose as his colourful robes were blazoned with a glittering star-pattern woven over blue velvet. His speech was worth listening to but not repeating, and he led them along into the castle and up the sweeping staircases with a kind smile and easy nature that probably gave the children around them a good dose of calm.

The great hall, when they reached it, was noise chanting and banging loudly behind sealed doors, young voices raised high in school spirit and trying to out-do the other houses. This part, at least, Arthur found reassuring.

When the chanting died all at once and silence swept back down, the doors up and swung open slow and smooth and without a breath of sound. Even their footsteps were muffled as the first years seemed too scared to move in anything less than a tight, creeping bunch. How Italy and Arthur wound up at the head of the group was a mystery, but they were brought along down the main aisle between the four long house tables. Red and gold banners hung high over the table furthest to Arthur's left as he walked, then gold and black, and on his right came the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw and finally the silver and green of Slytherin. Whether or not Italy noticed didn't matter, because they all came to a halt when Flitwick held up his wand, and with an extravagant flurry and a gust of wind, the sorting hat appeared.

A tiny wooden stool probably as old as the school itself didn't form out of nothing, but it looked like it did and as the hat spun in the air, it landed with an ordinary plop with its ratty edges and patched surface. Arthur barely remembered to look up and try to find the Headmistress at the teacher's table directly in front of them, but all he saw was Flitwick and a scroll, and he heard the first name called in a huff.

"Abott, Erica!" Alphabetical order, of course. First years were simply expected to sit and wait as a young girl with bouncing brown hair took a seat on the little stool and let Flitwick set the ratty old hat on her hair. After a tense five seconds of silence, the hat gave a shrill scream:

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The table furthest to the left exploded with cheers and screams, thoroughly embarrassing the poor child who pulled the hat off her head and hurried across the stone floor to join her new housemates.

"That's all there is to it?" Italy murmured, leaning in close and keeping his voice down so the noise of the next sorting helped muffle the words.

"RAVENCLAW!"
"A bit more complicated for you and I." Arthur explained, trying to think back to the last time, ages ago, when he'd worn that hat for entirely different reasons. "No sense explaining, you'll experience it soon enough."

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"It's not going to hurt like the lake did, right?" Arthur laughed under his breath a little when he pieced together Italy's question, shaking his head until he noticed Italy rubbing his wrist awkwardly through his robe sleeve. Curious, Arthur coaxed his hand up and tugged the sleeve out of the way just enough to see an angry red blush spread over Feliciano's fingers and up under the robe. Looking up quickly, the same red was chaffing at the collar of his shirt.

"Are you alright?" He mouthed the concern over another bellow from the hat- Italy couldn’t answer in the sudden silence, so they both stood there looking at each other and waiting for the next scream. That was when someone swatted Arthur on the arm and, affronted, he turned to see who it was.

He found Rose Weasley standing there giving him a sour frown, not sure what the child was so upset about until he heard the silence continuing to hang and spun back around to see Flitwick with eyebrows raised, hat in hand which he dangled like a silent bell.

Oh.

Kirkland.

"We'll meet again." He whispered, then quickly stepped free from the shrunken group and walked as fast as he could without running to reach the stool. It was rather like preparing to give a speech at any of their Nation-human councils. So many unfamiliar eyes watching him nod an apology to the Deputy Headmaster and accept a happy nod and gesture to sit from the old wizard.

The hat was soft old fabric, and when it came down over his hair it needed a moment to settle and sink down properly over his eyes and ears.

Silence again, he was rather getting tired of it, and then finally a raspy voice whispering just behind his ear.

"Many years since a mind like this sat under me..." Thinking was as good as speaking at a time like this- "So why don't you tell me why you've come back, or should I dust about for the answer myself?"

Oh, but they'd be here all night if he opened his mind up completely. The answer the hat wanted was handed over as easily as a roll of parchment from one friendly hand into another.

"Minds like yours have a strange understanding of friendly. You want to protect Hogwarts?" Arthur wanted to protect the students. "I imagine so will your friend. Such a noble reason, perhaps Gryffindor this time? No... Hah! You want your brother to exploit his, you think you can save the school and drag someone like you down under your control. Nations never change."

Could they not remain a bit more on topic? Nations were always ambitious and cunning, yes, they always placed themselves first and were quick to make and break deals on a whim depending on their masters. But what about Kirklands? Where did Arthur Kirkland belong?

"You've changed since last we met, I know exactly where you will go today..." excellent, get on with it then.

"SLYTHERIN!"
Off came the hat with a tug of the professor's hand and Arthur stood up without hesitation, a bit taken aback by how much noise washed over him. He was mulling the choice as he walked, understanding why but curious about how much the other three houses might have been competing. Arthur wasn't terribly sure why he heard noise from the Ravenclaw table as he passed it on his way to the cheering Slytherines, but he was bundled up and hoisted to a seat with minimal fuss, his clothes already beginning to change as a green and silver rope started weaving its way along the collar of his robe, the Slytherin's silver badge already soaking through the black fabric over his heart like mercury.

A few more names went by and Slytherin table went silent, a bit of ambient chatter and one or two half-meant questions coming his way about where he was from and what a strange name wasn't there a Kirkland up in the ministry somewhere? Oh well, nevermind, here was another one destined for Slytherin.

"Malfoy, Scorpius!"

He was at least the third generation of his family to be sorted, and Arthur watched as the nervous boy with his chess-set swallowed hard when the hat was placed over his head. The sorting hat hummed for a moment and then gave a little laugh like it was being tickled, then announced:

"SLYTHERIN!"

Arthur finally had a chance to look up at the Head-table as the professors in their best robes clapped politely for each sorted student. The noise, again, was much higher for a Slytherin than for the Hufflepuff that had come a few minutes before, but whatever was going on didn't seem to faze Draco Malfoy, because the school's healer was clapping rather quickly and his eyes were fixed on his son as Scorpius fled the yelling and practically jumped to the table, immediately slamming himself down with an upperclassman's help onto the seat next to Arthur.

"That- that was awful..."

"Careful, la- ah, you don't want to drop it!" It being Scorpius' chess set, which he was clutching to his heart like he was afraid his ribs were going to burst open and all his insides come tumbling out. "What was so hard?"

"It- It started to say b-badger to me! Badger! I'm a Malfoy, my grandfather would never speak to me again if I-"

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"No surprise there either." It wasn't Arthur who interrupted Scorpius because both of them turned around to see the new Gryffindor. Albus Potter was hard to spot however: he appeared to be flat on his back behind the stool with Flitwick chuckling and helping him up to his feet where he'd collapsed from relief.

There were only a few more frightened children and one nation left waiting for their names, and that number continued to shrink until it was only Italy and Rose Weasley left, V and W. They were saying something to each other and Weasley looked like she was quite pleased with whatever it was, they even shook hands. Arthur expected at any second for Italy to try and sneak a friendly kiss up onto her cheek, but Flitwick's voice interrupted whatever they were agreeing to and "Vargas, Feliciano" went running up to the stool.

Arthur looked up and caught sight of Headmistress McGonagall, resplendent in black and indigo robes, go quite tense when his name was called. If Arthur had to guess, when he looked back at Italy
where he was chatting happily up at Flitwick with a ridiculous smile on his face, Gryffindor or Hufflepuff seemed tied as possibilities. The idiot was still talking as Flitwick laughed and simply dropped the hat on his head.

"SLYTERIN!"

"What?"

It- it didn't even stop to think. Arthur wasn't even sure it came to rest properly on his oblivious face before it shouted the name and then fell unceremoniously into Italy's lap.

Him? Slytherin? Yes, he was a nation but-

And then he heard it. That was when Arthur Kirkland finally heard why there was so much noise when Slytherins were sorted, because Italy wasn't dazzled the way Arthur was been or fled the way Scorpius and the others had run to the safety of their house table. Italy just sat there and took up the hat to have a look at it, offering it back amicably to Flitwick before even bothering to stand up.

The Gryffindor table, almost impossible to see where it was hidden by yelling Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs across the hall, was going absolutely insane and not even all the yelling and cheering from Slytherin could drown out three other tables full of students.

Slytherin could yell all they liked, they couldn't cover up the sound of booing.

Because Italy was still standing there, and like the idiot he was he almost looked like he was about to wave to the other tables before he saw their faces, faces Arthur couldn't see because they were turned away from him and focused on the first year who'd just been declared a member of the House of Snakes.

"Snakeskin! Snakeskin!" they were shouting, or just bellowing deep in their throats with boos and hisses, laughing in the kind of mocking, awful way that only children knew how to do. And Italy, in the middle of it, seemed shocked.

"Oh God, why is he just waiting there?" An older student from Slytherin stood up and Arthur didn't have time to look for a Prefect badge or anything else on her robes, but she was up and immediately earned hisses from the Ravenclaw table before Italy did the last thing the rest of them could have expected.

He held a hand out to Professor Flitwick and nodded his head with something unheard. Confused, the Deputy Headmaster gave the sorting hat back to him and Italy, one of the world’s most cowardly nations shrunk down to an eleven-year-old child, held the hat up with both hands and placed it back on his head without hesitation.

The result was exactly what circumstances called for.

"BY ORDER OF SALAZAR SLYTERIN, ONE OF FOUR FOUNDERS OF HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDY" an unholy voice, centuries unheard, came roaring down from the depths of the hat to blaze down Italy's robes and instantly stitch the green and silver badge to his clothes while he stood rigidly trying to keep upright. "THIS STUDENT IS CLAIMED FOR THE HOUSE OF SLYTERIN, AND LET ANY WHO OPPOSE RAISE WAND AGAINST HEADMASTER AND HEAD OF HOUSE."

There was silence after the thundering fury of the hat's voice, green and silver sparks showering off its ratty folds as it tumbled off Italy's head a second time and laid there like a rag on the floor. Italy
himself was visibly trembling, and the effort it took to get down on one knee to retrieve the hat, he wound up with both knees and a hand on the floor to keep him up before Flitwick tried to lend a hand again.

He was waved off, the hat was handed back to him with another polite nod from Italy that led to a painfully innocent wave in Rose Weasley's direction where she was petrified all alone at the end of the hall. He took two heavy steps towards Slytherin table, which was as silent as the rest of them, then stopped and quietly shuffled around to face the teacher's table.

Headmistress McGonagall looked like death itself had just sat down beside her, Professor Malfoy's face was absolutely frozen with a white mask of what was either rage or humiliation, and the rest of the staff were either staring in shock or absolutely mortified looking down at the rest of the school.

Italy bowed like he was saying sorry for something and trying to excuse himself. The Slytherin Prefect unhinged her legs and swept forward to quickly get an arm around him, a student he assumed was either the Head Girl or Head Boy of Slytherin house quickly rushing up to help steer Feliciano Vargas, shell-shocked and dizzy, to a seat Scorpius immediately opened up between Arthur and himself.

"Good God-"
"Are you alright?"
"Vargas? Is he pureblood?"
"Does it matter?"
"Give him some space!"

Someone's wand produced a stream of water into one of the silver goblets resting on the table, and the same Prefect was given the job of tipping Italy's head back and making him swallow. When he drank Arthur could see that the red rash he'd been so worried about at the start of the sorting was completely gone, probably blasted away by the Sorting Hat's magic.

"I..." Italy sounded like he'd just run a mile or more, but before Arthur felt himself getting too carried away with his concern, he remembered that these jinxed bodies of theirs weren't nearly as resistant as they were meant to be. "I guess the school... does like me a little..." He couldn't quite keep his eyes open as he spoke, smiling up at the Prefect who was lecturing several other students to keep their seats and stay quiet as the sorting ceremony finally ended.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Italy didn't even try looking up and Arthur didn't bother with it either, he was more worried about keeping Italy from falling over onto the floor where his head was lolling to one side.

"Hogwarts: A History... a good read..."
"You really do sound terrible."
"I'm fine."

"Do you need me to get my- eh, I mean, Professor Malfoy?" Scorpius was a good child from what Arthur had seen so far, stumbling over the words a little before Arthur noticed that the Slytherins standing behind them hadn't moved yet. The Prefect and Head Boy were still there, not even looking down at them, but facing the Ravenclaw table behind them. They were... acting like a wall.
"I intended to begin this year's Start of Term feast with a short word on the tragedy felt here at the end of last year." The Headmistress's voice was far away, but Arthur tried looking up when he unconsciously let Italy just tip over and rest his head on his shoulder, an arm behind his friend to keep him from falling while Scorpius looked with the rest of them up to the Head-table. "But I see now that the words I chose would be deeply inappropriate. So, I will settle to say this: the Sorting Hat speaks only the truth. If any student, Prefect or First Year, Charms Protégé or Quidditch All-star, takes it upon themselves to monitor who is brought into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, then you have received your warning. You will not only face the Head of House of the student you have wronged, but myself as well. That is my first and final word on the matter."

Arthur was not so sure about that.

"Classes begin at nine sharp tomorrow morning. For now, let us commence with our feast!"

It seemed he would not be writing to Scotland tomorrow after all.

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The welcoming feast at Hogwarts was good enough for Feliciano tonight. He couldn't really taste the food and only made sure to eat enough to keep himself going and get a good night's sleep. The roaring nausea from the Sorting Hat's screaming had faded long before the crippling pain in his gut from what had caused the hat to go so wild in the first place.

"Alright! First years follow me! All together now!"

There were two Prefects for every house, one girl and one boy, and it was the boy who called for first years to get up and start walking out of the great hall. They left before the other houses started getting up from their meals and Feliciano chose not to wonder why.

Aside from himself, England and Scorpius, there was another boy by the name of Charles Higgs who seemed too dense for conversation after eating his way through half the table and yawning loudly as they left. A small girl with pale skin and flowing black hair was named Eliza Gamp, and Feliciano didn't hear the other two girls' names before he was too busy trying not to trip down the shifting staircases as they climbed down from the great hall and around confusing bends and turns through the castle.

"If you're in Slytherin house then it means you're destined for great things." The Prefect was a tall young man with dark skin and strong features, even if he did seem to lack any real interest in them as they followed his fast steps. "The other houses? Simply jealous. They have to latch onto one or two great heroes to make their mark, but Slytherins? Every one of us can make something of ourselves."

Maybe he was coming up with excuses for what had happened back there, Feliciano just wanted his hands to relax so he'd stop hurting his palms. The cross under his shirt felt heavy and cold, but maybe he was just too tired for this much stress. As much as he did love to relax and sleep when it pleased him, this little body was getting to be a bit frustrating.

"What does snakeskin mean, Zabini?" One of the girls asked the question. England was hovering a little too close as they passed through another door and Feliciano woke up at the feeling of cold, damp air touching his skin. He didn't think he liked the stale scent of the air as the gold glow of the previous passage ways dimmed to a murky glow, but the Prefect kept going and the rest of them had to follow. Gamp was the one who asked the question.

Zabini, the Prefect, just gave a harsh laugh as he continued marching them past flickering white
candles and musty wet stones. This place was going to be awful in winter...

"The other houses think it's an insult! Do you know what's so bad about shedding your scars and discarding things that don't fit who you are anymore? Constant renewal is what Slytherins are about. Reinventing yourself and getting rid of the old you: like a snake shedding its skin."

At least their Prefect had house pride, because Feliciano just wasn't feeling it anymore as the passage dipped down steeply and the distant drip of water made him shiver.

Maybe Rose Weasley had been right, maybe Feliciano should have hoped for Hufflepuff with its dormitory right by the kitchens instead of being open to whatever the hat decided.

They stopped all at once at a little alcove in the wall, nothing resting in it until Feliciano forced his eyes to focus on the green stones and what almost, vaguely, looked like the body of a snake scratched into the stones with its head raised up and two little black holes resting there like eyes.

"We use a password system here in Slytherin, sharing it with students outside the house can get your tongue hexed, or worse: we won't tell you the new one."

That was a joke, right?

"Rosetti!"

The name woke Feliciano up properly as the two black holes flared with green light. The faded scratches began to writhe like a proper snake in the wall, its body rising up until it began to split open, the darkness forming a doorway that consumed the alcove and let the first years enter two at a time.

At least someone remembered...

Through the narrow doorway the space suddenly increased, and the pervasive cold fell away. It wasn't damp in here where a vaulted ceiling was illuminated by round green lamps hanging from chains, and there were even windows along one far away wall that gave off a bright green glow. There was probably more light during the day because all Feliciano could really see were the green leather couches ready for reclining and study.

"This way, first year boys on the left, girls down the right." They walked along the dim space and followed the Prefect's instructions to pass under two arches, a soft hum of magic telling them there was a spell over the passages: probably to keep boys and girls from sneaking around. Zabini went with the boys, leading them down a small corridor with seven rooms and taking them straight to the one at the very end.

"You'll keep the same room for seven years here at Hogwarts unless you fail. The names on the plaque will change every year to show where you belong." Which, if Feliciano understood correctly, meant that the four beds that were hidden behind the door had once been...

"I call the window!" Sleepy Higgs went in first and quickly took the bed by the only glowing window in the long stone chamber, the candles in the walls brightening up pleasantly as he passed. There were already trunks and suitcases against one wall, and Feliciano was surprised when he heard a familiar meow and peered in after England to see his cat curled up on one of the pillows, second from the door, and completely content to remain exactly where it was as Scorpius drifted in to take a look around.

"Ah- Mister Prefect, Sir."
"Zabini, Vargas. Pascal Zabini." His name almost sounded Italian, but even if Feliciano had the
strength to try he knew there wouldn't be much of a connection between them.

"Zabini, which bed was Rosetti's?"

His question caused the older student's proud face to weaken a little. His age came out from under
his polished little badge and at sixteen or seventeen years old, Feliciano was impressed with him for
swallowing his nerves and trying to hang on to his tact.

"How do you know about that, Vargas?"

"My family was close to the Rosettis. After last year they're all gone now, but I'd still like to
remember them."

Zabini was quiet and the other three students were listening too. Maybe Scorpius knew something
from his father, but Feliciano wasn't sure if Higgs had any idea what Feliciano was asking about.
Finally, the prefect just looked straight over his head and pointed at the bed with the drowsy cat.

"Is that your familiar, Vargas?"

Feliciano checked again.

"Yes sir."

"As far as I know that bed was his, but now it's yours."

"Thank you, sir."

"Get to bed now, all of you! There will be time for breakfast tomorrow morning, but then you've got
your first Herbology lesson. Rest up, you're going to need it!"

Slytherin beds were made of stone, but that was like judging Gryffindor beds for being made of
wood. The grey stone bodies were decorated with snake tails and fat green emeralds that lit up gently
when the person laying on the blankets was still awake, meaning that between the beds and the
window there was always just enough light to see by if you rolled over in the middle of the night for
no reason.

There were also curtains, sheer things that didn't seem very useful until properly unfurled. They were
perfectly opaque when pulled down, and an enchantment on the glossy silk meant that they gave off
an impressive mount of light inside while remaining completely dark on the outside.

With his jinxed body begging for sleep and the curtains closed and glowing around him, Arthur
drafted his first letter home to Scotland, making sure to detail the good and bad and not caring about
splotches or scribbles on the paper. He'd re-write it again tomorrow most likely, and probably send it
off using a school owl by the end of the week.

Another awful plague of a jinxed body, beyond the hundreds of awful limitations to endurance and
respect, was an awful dependence on sleep that Arthur as a rule simply wasn't used to, and which
meant he regretted his letter-writing the next morning when he was woken up by the same prefect as
last night rapping loudly on the dormitory door.

"First years! Up! Time to get up!" He didn't come barging in thank goodness, but Arthur wasn't the
only one looking bleary-eyed and exhausted as he splashed cold water on his face from a little sink in the dormitory corner and pulled on his school uniform underneath his Slytherin robes.

Italy recovered first, the wretched boy, followed almost immediately by Scorpius who was going through his bag in a panic when Arthur stepped into the common room. Italy was busy stroking his cat and simultaneously whisking the cat-hairs off his robe with his wand, and Higgs was still only half-dressed behind Arthur.

"Sleep well?" Arthur asked, receiving a sunny smile for his attention from Italy.

"We're under the lake, aren't we? I could hear the water last night and it was wonderful!" Arthur hadn't been listening, but he was looking forward to it if that was the case. "Have you looked at our classes yet?"

He hadn't, but Scorpius came over to them with anxiety running down his face, absolutely terrified of something or another as Italy offered up his schedule so they could all see. Higgs simply didn't bother.

"Herbology by the green houses,"

"Longbottom, oh, I hear he's awful...!"

"Really?" Arthur asked, suspicious of something like that as he looked Scorpius up and down before dismissing whatever was giving the boy the jitters. "You'd think a former member of Dumbledore's Army would be nice to students, especially first years."

"Professor Longbottom's Head of Gryffindor House." Yes, Arthur could see that happening. "But the professors had an awful row last night, somebody's saying the other houses are all at zero points this morning!"

"Points?" Feliciano piped up, and Arthur was beginning to find it ridiculous how many things he had to explain to him.

"All houses begin with fifty points at the start of the year, are you saying Slytherin has a headstart then?"

"Yes, and-" Scorpius was interrupted by the low grate of stones grinding against each other, and the house common room went quiet as a familiar wizard in long white robes edged with green stepped into the vaulted chamber. The light was much brighter this morning so it was easy to see Draco Malfoy's expression, something caught between troubled and vindicated.

"I see this is where my students are hiding." He said the words almost kindly, but his eyes skipped over Scorpius rather than settle on him for even a moment. It was probably better that way. "First years are excused this morning, but the rest of you know better: either we eat together or not at all, I won't have a repeat of last night. We are Slytherins and we do not hide."

"Professor Malfoy!" One Slytherin yelled, a tall girl standing on the other side of the room from the first years. "Is it true the other houses lost all their points last night? On the day before classes?"

"You can see for yourself in the great hall, but thank you for mentioning that Miss Harper: that's precisely why I'm here so early." And then Professor Malfoy went cold. In fact, his voice practically froze: "If I catch wind of any Slytherins taunting or provoking the other houses about last night, no matter how much they deserve it, I will personally remove the last of Slytherin's points myself. Is that understood?"
"Yes, professor."

"And don't pretend I won't know just because the infirmary is so far away, you'll come to fear me as much as Miss Norris if you aren't careful." Arthur fully believed him too, and they all mumbled 'yes professor' in unison.

"Very well, you have one hour to eat and hurry off to your classes. I won't tolerate tardiness on the first day, hurry up!"

Mandating that the whole house eat together seemed strange to Arthur. He hadn't attended Hogwarts in centuries, but he'd certainly dropped in and taken a look around from time to time over the years. While they were marching down to the great hall however, he finally lost his temper and just turned around and shook Scorpius until the boy babbled whatever was making him so anxious.

"I lost my ink well, I lost it and I can't find it anywhere, I-"

"Bloody hell then just take mine!" And stop with the wide eyed terror, there was no cause for it and Arthur didn't have the patience. Losing his temper on the first day was not a good way to begin an entire year of this charade, but at least it calmed Scorpius down enough that he could eat in peace.

Arthur's next challenge was Italy.

"You look miserable, again."

"If I knew what I was eating maybe I'd feel better."

"It's hashbrowns- don't make that face!"

"Is there even salt on it?"

"Add salt, you twit!"

"What about garlic? Or sage? Do they have parsley in this country?"

"Eat fruit then!"

Arthur Kirkland's patience were right at their limit when, at the head of the seven First Years, he stomped and scowled his way down across the grounds to the school greenhouses. When they looked through the glass panes of Greenhouse Number One the lot of them stopped in a moment of confusion.

"What-"

"Is he already teaching?"

"We've still got five minutes!"

Arthur checked his watch, the charmed item keeping him in this tiny body, and there it was plain as day: 8:55.

"Maybe he's just giving them a talk like Professor Malfoy did for us?" Italy made the suggestion and Arthur hoped he was right, but when he pulled on the green house door it just rattled and didn't open. Impossible.

"Should we knock?" One of the girls asked, a haughty look on her face that Arthur appreciated as he balled up his fist and rapped hard on the glass.
The most he could see of the Professor was a tall man wrapped up in red, the details of his robes obscured by the warped nature of the glass. When he didn't seem to notice the noise, Arthur beat his fist on the door a second time, making sure to knock hard and fast.

Still nothing. Longbottom didn't even turn around.

"The professor said don't be late!" Three minutes of their time had gone when Italy nudged him out of the way, wand in hand which he tapped twice on the door knob and stated the magic word to unlock.

There was a gout of grey sparks from his wand's black tip, but then nothing.

"That's the Italian version, you have to use the English: Allohamora!"

"First of all, that's not English, it's Latin, and second-"

"Don't bicker, just make some noise!"

Five desperate children and two affronted nations all banging on the glass should have been more than enough noise to get the Gryffindors inside the greenhouse to turn around and just let them in. Instead, Eliza Gamp started crying, and Charles Higgs started yelling at Arthur as if this was somehow all his damned fault.

"What's goin' on 'ere?"

Arthur turned around to find himself in line with an impossibly tall person wrapped up under a shaggy coat made of at least three kinds of animal pelt, a pink umbrella held in a hand bigger than Arthur's adult head, and silvery, snowy white hair making up a beard and wild curls around a squashed face and large dark eyes.

Arthur couldn't remember the name of the Hogwarts groundskeeper, but he knew an honest soul when he met one.

"The door won't open!" Gamp wailed, Italy fluttering around her with the other two girls trying to get her to stop crying. "P-Professor M-M-Malfoy said d-don't be late but-!"

"Why would Neville go lockin' the door? Outta the way, boys." Arthur was brushed aside by one large hand, and a moment later there was the tell-tale rattle of the greenhouse's lock still holding firm. 
"He don't even lock it during lessons, that don't-"

Another tug, this time with an angry grunt.

"Why I oughta-"

A push this time, just in-case.

"Fine then."

And then the awful noise of twisted metal and shattering glass, as the door was ripped right off its hinges and a few screams from Gryffindor and Slytherin students alike led to the groundskeeper bending over and sticking his head in the greenhouse, presumably to smile at the affronted Wizard inside.

"Hagrid! What on earth are you doing!?"

"G'mornin, Professor Longbottom! Seems there's a bit o' trouble with the door! I'll fix it up late t'day,
but for now here's the rest of your class."

They were ushered inside by a large hand and the mixed smell of fresh earth and old brandy, which was quickly overpowered by the mulch and life of the warm greenhouse air.

In front of them was a wizard much younger than most of the professors they'd seen so far except for Malfoy. He had quite the long face, his dark brown hair grown out and tied in a very short tail behind his head. His red robes were rather short, more like a tunic over black pants and what looked suspiciously like a pair of muggle gumboots. There was no gold to him until he moved, and there was a sparkle of swirling gold patterns buried under the red folds of his short sleeves and the thick buckle of his belt shone under a spray of garden soil. His hands and wrists were lost under thick brown gloves caked in dirt, and his wand was clearly visible at his belt along with several satchels and tools for work in the gardens.

He was mystified by what he'd just heard, looking down at the seven of them before lifting his eyes back up to Hagrid. He looked like he was asking if what he'd just been told was true, and when Hagrid didn't take it back, the professor remembered himself and swept a hand over several ceramic pots set up for the Slytherins to stand near.

"In that case, I think myself an honourable man." He looked over his shoulder where Arthur saw a massive sunflower standing in a pot, its brown face enchanted to look like the face of a clock. "Ten points to Slytherin, replacing the five I took for each minute of tardiness."

There was an uncomfortable squirm through the assembled gryffindors, most of them already wearing gloves and each one holding a pair of small pruning sheers in their hands. When Professor Longbottom turned back around, they all met his gaze evenly, especially Rose Weasley and the shy Albus Potter. Arthur was both pleased and disappointed that the culprit wasn't amongst them.

"When I find who's responsible for an immature prank like that, mark my words they'll find themselves neck-deep in Mandrake pots. Thank you, Hagrid."

"Always happy t' help, Professor."

So began their first day at Hogwarts.
Primary Lessons

Herbology with Gryffindor, History of Magic with Ravenclaw, Charms with Hufflepuff, and Potions with Gryffindor again.

That was three of their five days at Hogwarts, and Potions was the only class where it felt like the Slytherins collectively caught a break.

Almost a month into their studies at Hogwarts and Arthur finally watched Italy snap and lose his temper. And it wasn't about Rose Weasley and Albus Potter utterly refusing to so much as be caught standing near him in the hall, or the way she even hurtfully told him to his face in their second week to stop trying to talk to her. No, the Republic of Italy lost his temper for something else entirely.

"That's right! I have no idea what the Wizarding Council of 1441 was about!" He wasn't completely enraged, it took an act of God to get that sort of reaction out of him, but his was the kind of frustration that could only come from being repeatedly being talked down to for weeks by children who couldn't even write their own grocery lists. "Or who brokered the peace between the Giants and Wizards of Northumbria! I don't know when dragon hunts were banned in England or Scotland or Wales or Ireland because I'M NOT BRITISH!"

History of Magic was arguably the easiest subject Arthur had to deal with and the hardest one for Italy, not because the readings were at all difficult, but because he had a poor memory for history that had nothing to do with him. So that was the class where he lost his temper, and the professor- a dopey ghost by the name of Binns, calmly took ten points from Slytherin from the outburst.

The rest of them agreed that it was worth losing the points if it meant not having to listen to the first year Ravenclaws snicker behind their books if Italy so much as shifted on his seat and drew a blank each time he was asked a question. That silence only lasted for about a week, but by the time they were halfway through October Arthur was used to giving Italy a firm jab with his wand under their desk so he wouldn't open his mouth and share the dangerous piece of Italian Magical history buried in the core of his wand.

"Hogwarts is not the place for plague stories." He warned as they packed up their bags and hurried along to Charms hoping to catch up with Scorpius.

"Just wait until sixth year." Italy vowed, his sour mood improving just from leaving the room behind. "Try and stop me from saying something then."

Charms with Flitwick was actually quite fun, and when you were used to writing twenty page reports, a half-foot of parchment was almost laughable in terms of homework. They both made a point of getting at least one or two swishes of the wand wrong at first, but as time crept by they both wound up with legitimate criticism. It was embarrassing.

"Your wrist is much too stiff, Mister Kirkland. It's fine for turning a matchstick into a push-pin, but you must get the basics down properly before moving on to more complex spells!" Complex spells like taking a semi-immortal entity and de-aging it to masquerade as a ten year old boy? It was Italy's turn to prod him in the side in Charms class when comments like that came up, especially because he came to realize that his wand-work was sloppy.

Forget embarrassing, he was downright humiliated.

Herbology wasn't terrible, but there was that constant sense that they were collectively about to be
forgotten by Professor Longbottom. To his own students he was extremely attentive and on-hand to provide help, which was why Arthur encouraged Italy to keep trying to pick spots close to Weasley and Potter: because it meant when Longbottom came along with a bit of advice for the Gryffindors, the Slytherins had a better chance of hearing it and not mangling the plants they were pruning or watering or otherwise taking care of.

Otherwise, Longbottom only noticed when something went wrong at one of the Slytherin pots. He was never cruel and he needed a good deal of motivation to dock points, but it was discouraging for the rest of their class to only hear what they’d done wrong or how they’d harmed the plant they were supposed to be tending. He just seemed forever disappointed by what they produced, and as time trudged on Arthur found himself feeling distinctly protective of the other First Years whenever the Herbology Professor was mentioned.

"My rose garden in London's won plenty of awards." And of course, Italy had to bear the brunt of Arthur's complaints the same way he had to mind Italy muttering about the Milano Statute of 508. "Not a speck of magic and featured in three different magazines. Hmph!"

But again, Potions was the place where it felt like the seven of them could just sit down and take a deep breath.

The potions classroom was in the dungeon, close to the Slytherin common room, and it was taught by the previous Head of Slytherin House, Professor Slughorn. He was a positively ancient professor, over a hundred years old but with a taste for the kinds of concoctions that kept his hair coloured and his skin suspiciously smooth. His age showed up in his tendency to nod off during lessons, and the way his voice didn't match his face by sounding positively ragged and wheezy.

According to the older students after giving up his position as Head of House to Professor Malfoy, Slughorn had become completely blind to House colours. He was simply too old to care about them, and had changed his focus to something else entirely: money.

Which meant in a way that he still saw houses because the percentage of nobility in Slytherin was simply that much higher. However, if you were a poor Slytherin like Higgs then you weren't worth his time.

Arthur had to evoke his "foster-child" story to escape too many questions about his surname Kirkland, Feliciano played dumb and acted like his English wasn't good enough to discuss what his brother's job in Rome entailed. Scorpius had an awful time trying to get through a single lesson without being asked some kind of embarrassing question about his father several floors over their heads, but there were rumours of a visit to Slughorn's office by the School Healer that put a stop to those sorts of things at once.

"How am I supposed to know if he likes yorkshire pudding more than cauldron cakes?" Having his own father for House Head and school doctor seemed to be the main source of Scorpius' anxiety, but once the rhythm of school life caught him he stopped quaking quite so hard at the thought of eating lunch with his father watching them from across the hall. "They sit next to each other at the Head table, you think Slughorn would just look over and figure it out himself!"

Potter and Weasley were put through much the same ordeal, at least Weasley was once her mother's identity was revealed and Slughorn pieced together which Weasley she took her name from.

Everyone earned the same level of instruction from Slughorn when brewing their laughing draughts and sleep potions, but the five students he'd honed in on as "star pupils" had a harder time getting anything done around his constant questions.
What Arthur and Feliciano- who he was falling out of habit with calling "Italy"- were both hoping for was the blur of days that would bring important holidays to them faster, but there was one thing every week that put a stop to that lulling comfort every time it tried to roll over them between drowsy lectures and children's essays.

And that event was the post.

"They're coming-"

"Duck, Vargas!"

And Feliciano did duck, he practically dove under the table every time the great hall started to fill with the noise and chatter of owl hoots and falling feathers. Every time the post came they both received something. Arthur dealt a dark owl that looked like its grey feathers had a blue wash over its wings and a mock-up of the Scottish cross over its chest. Scotland's bird was foul tempered and would insist on sitting on Arthur's plate until he fed it at least one sausage or produced a pre-written letter with his response to the last package.

If only Italy could have been so lucky.

"I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY IN THAT SHITTY ENGLISH SCHOOL YOU WENT OFF TO AND LEFT ME ALL ALONE HERE WITH EVERYTHING ELSE TO TAKE CARE OF."

If South Italy was forced to get his hands on an owl and write his letters by hand, then he apparently decided to go the extra mile and find the special paper and just enough magic to make sure North Italy never enjoyed a post delivery in silence. "HAS YOUR STOMACH FUCKING COLLAPSED ON ITSELF YET I DAMNED WELL HOPE SO WE BOTH KNOW WHAT ENGLISH FOOD IS LIKE AND SCOTTISH SLOP IS WORSE BUT IT'S EXACTLY WHAT YOU DESERVE."

The only reason South Italy's Howlers weren't barred was thanks to his own forethought: he never cast one in English, and given the difficulty Arthur himself had in understanding them, it wasn't standard Italian either. He was using a regional dialect, and Arthur only knew all the insults because he knew Feliciano's older brother.

"READ THE REPORT AND SIGN THE DAMNED PAPERS FUCK YOU I HOPE YOUR CAT VOMITS IN YOUR HAIR: DON'T DIE."

The first Howler had been the worst: an angry red letter with smoke hissing out the folds of the envelope and melting the wax seal while Feliciano had panicked trying to figure out what on earth he'd done to deserve such an embarrassment in his first week. The subsequent howlers were each promptly opened as soon as anybody at the Slytherin table could get their hands on them, including a Prefect who had kindly Accio'd one letter before the owl had even finished crossing the Great Hall.

But after all the screaming and swearing from across Europe there was always an intense pause as the letter evaporated into ash and inevitably ruined Feliciano's English breakfast. Arthur couldn't pretend Italy even cared about that last part, because South Italy had also picked up one other piece of magic in the wake of his brother going off to Hogwarts for a year.

"Ooh, what are those?"

"Cannoli! He never makes cannoli!" The spell was a delivery charm, one which whisked a plate or box of something freshly made directly to Italy's spot at the Slytherin table. Today's treat was fried pastry rolls stuffed with sweet, creamy cheese and dusted with crushed almonds and sugar, and Italy had clearly forgotten about the shrill screaming as he instantly picked one up and bit it in half with a delirious look of pleasure on his face.
"Might I try one?" Arthur asked.

"No."

"What? What do you mean no?"

Italy pushed his ash-dusted custard over in front of Arthur, who was deeply offended and about ready to jump up and start kicking the idiot sitting next to him.

"I mean no, you can't have one."

"I've never had Italian desserts before..." Scorpius was sitting on Italy's other side and leaning over as he made the remark, and when he was happily offered one of the sweets Arthur roared in outrage.

"Don't you dare play favourites! I asked first!"

"He didn't ask," Italy rebuked, grinning with a bit of ricotta stuck to his cheek and almond sugar on his lips. "He lamented, and because he's grown up on English food and never had the chance for real flavour, I pitied him."

"Take that back!"

"Wow, this is so good...!"

"See?"

All Arthur could see was the fact that he'd made two atrociously bad friends, which was why he didn't feel any remorse when he got up from the table and gathered his books and the latest report from London up under his arm and left the great hall behind.

"If you two are late to Flying then it'll be your own damned fault!" No strange incidents like the locked door had happened since the start of term, but Arthur wasn't in the mood to go jinxing anything by pointing that out. He just listened to the sound of heavy claws scratching the floor behind him as Scotland's owl gave a disgruntled growl about having to walk, stopping just long enough for a harsh flap of wings and then the impossible weight of the blue bird landing on his arm to settle. When the creature began piercing his robe with its claws, Arthur voiced his disapproval.

"Honestly! Mind your grip you awful thing." The owl bit his ear for scolding it, not a gentle nip or playful cuff, but an actual bite that hurt more than it should have and led to a lot of arm-waving and several stray feathers as Arthur wobbled his way up a flight of stairs. "Menace! Why didn't you fly up to the owlery yourself then you mangy old-"

"Arthur Kirkland you put that wand down at once!"

Arthur expected a teacher until he realized the voice was much too shrill for that, turning around to see the tall red-headed Rose Weasley marching towards him with her own wand out and clutched in her hand, matching his where he'd drawn the oak rod so he could beat the owl off his arm where the claws were digging in even further over his elbow. Her blue eyes were narrow and scowling at him, every inch a pouty child with a sour temper as her red and gold badge shone over her breast.

"How dare you threaten to hex a poor animal! Let go of it at once!"

"It's grabbing me! Not the other way around!" Giving his arm another hard shake to prove his point, Scotland's owl huffed angrily and finally released him, dropping back to the floor and raising both wings awkwardly trying to keep its feathers off the stones.
"There!" he hissed at the bird. "Now you can either walk down with me to the Slytherin commons for the letter you want, or fly up to the owlery and get something to eat, you foul creature."

"It's not the owl's fault you're too tiny to carry it properly." As if she had anything to do with this conversation!

"A lecture about circumstance is rich coming from someone like you, Miss Weasley!" So he pulled a dirty card, and he didn’t even feel bad about it.

"Is that supposed to be a jab at my family?" Rose gasped, her face going pink as her temper came roaring up. "I'll have you know the Weasleys-"

"Actually, it was about Vargas!" He cut her off, bringing up something that had been irritating him for a while now. "You were all buddy-buddy on the train with each other, telling stories and shaking hands, but as soon as he put on a ratty old hat it's like he grew a third arm and started drooling."

A guilty look petrified the child standing across the hall from him, and Arthur felt himself being pulled in two distinct directions: one that begged he let the little girl go off now with her tail not quite stuffed between her legs, and the other one that was irritated with this petty behaviour already and wanted to make it quite clear that her acting like this would not be tolerated beyond school walls.

The older, harsher part of him won.

"Quite a funny name you Gryffindors have for us: snakeskins is it? Are you afraid one day you'll be talking to Vargas and his face will slop off? Because just watching the two of you it seems like you're the one whose skin changed when you put that red badge on your robes."

"You be quiet, I won't have you disrespecting my house!"

"And I won't have you disrespecting my friend." he challenged. "I'm not here to be nice, Miss Weasley, if you and I got off on the wrong foot then fine, we'll go our separate ways. But you and Vargas were about to link arms and walk off singing on the first day, so if you want to erase all of that then I'll say this: find a better reason for it, you two-faced gryffin."

"How dare you- you! You ugly little rat!" She'd inherited her mother's brilliant mind, but also her father's astoundingly short temper. When Rose Weasley raised her wand Arthur was so surprised he didn't even hear what she said, he just saw a blast of gold light coming straight at him and performed the only maneuver that mattered.

His wand came up and his arm remembered the stroke long before his conscious mind found it. His wand-tip connected with the very edge of the spell as he followed through and pulled his elbow up, wrist circling over his head as his feet slid wide under him and his knees bent to lower him down and keep his head away from the racing sparks. There was a momentarily collision of two different techniques, but he was already committed and hadn't practiced in so long that he didn't know how to break the habit.

Instead of slamming the spell down on the stones next to him, Arthur's arm and wand whipped around and sent the spell firing straight back at the witch who'd cast it. The spell struck Rose Weasley full in the face, and the poor girl screamed and fell to the floor in a heap.

Stunned by his own actions, Arthur looked at his brother's owl. The familiar was staring up at him with wide yellow eyes declaring him an absolute fool, and when it seemed to think he was asking for help its entire body jumped before it turned tail and waddle-ran its way back towards the great hall. Typical.
"Rose?"

"I heard a scream! A terrible sound! What's happened here?"

A young male voice and then an odd string of questions that came from the walls themselves, blue vapours signalling the arrival of a ghost while running footsteps meant someone else was coming too. Arthur didn't spare a look back to see whether it was a house ghost or anyone else who formed through the walls, he just saw two running students who were much taller than him with red ties around their necks charging towards him.

"Bollocks." His fight-or-flight instincts were locked, pride refusing to turn away from a group of children as a boy with black hair dropped down next to the girl where she'd pulled her knees up and had her face in both hands. She sounded like she was crying and when she recognized the voice she just started saying "James" over and over again.

"You!" The other was a very tall Gryffindor girl with silver hair streaked with red, a white wand clutched in her hand as she waved it threateningly at him. "Snakeskin! What did you do to my little cousin?"

"Now just calm down!" Arthur started, hands up and wand still out but pointed uselessly up at the ceiling. He felt himself backing up as the Gryffindor house ghost, Nearly-Headless Nick, properly manifested with a great big ruff around his severed seventeenth century neck. "I only threw her spell back at her, whatever it did has nothing to do with me!"

"A first year who can redirect spells? What a little liar you are!" Oh Lord, was that a- a Prefect's badge on her robes?

"It's the truth! Ask her yourself when she stops crying I just-"

"You're just going to regret that!" The boy could have been in second year, maybe third, but he pulled his arm back with something happening under his breath.

Arthur didn’t hesitate before he called out for the ghost:

"Nick! I need a teacher!" He knew better than to use first year status to defend himself!

"Hmm-! I think you're right!"

Arthur was so distracted by the ghost that he missed his window to stop the expeliarmus spell that struck his wrist and crippled his arm for a brief moment of pain. His wand flew free and struck the wall as he fell back even more and felt the urge to run growing stronger. They weren't going to hurt him, they wouldn't know how with magic at their age, but two against one, this- this-!!

"Get away from him!" Something else came off the girl's wand this time but it was struck down by a blast of purple light behind Arthur, his tiny body not cooperating as a mixture of poisonous insult and raging anger kept him utterly frozen on his feet. A hand grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him back, and then he was left staring at the back of Pascal Zabini's robes as the Slytherin Prefect stepped in front of him. "Potter! Weasley! Pick on someone your own size!"

"Or better yet-" Another voice this time, one that was much older than a set of teenagers facing off and which caused a sudden darkness to fall over the corridor. The sound of it was familiar, but the dark, heavy tone... "I remove ten points from my own house, and tell you how disappointed I am, Victoire, that you would throw a curse like that at an unarmed first year."

"Go get your wand, Kirkland." Arthur was trying to sneak a look out past Zabini's robes when the
older student spoke down at him. When he looked up, he found the upperclassman giving him a stern look that didn't belong to a sixteen-year-old boy. "I thought I warned you first years not to wander the halls alone." It had seemed like such a nuisance restriction at the time...

Arthur fetched his wand off the floor where it had fallen, relieved that there was no damage to the polished old oak as he stuffed it back up his sleeve and finally saw the speaker who'd broken up the fight before it could escalate.

Professor Longbottom was much cleaner than normal given first class hadn't started yet, and he was kneeling in his short robes next to Rose Weasley, coaxing her to show her face where two long curtains of eyebrow hair had grown and smothered her eyes and cheeks with ugly bristles. Arthur knew his face was flushed with insult at what she'd tried to do, and frankly he just wasn't sorry for throwing it back in her snobbish face.

"No damage done then, if any of it starts growing back you'll have to go straight up to Professor Malfoy." With his prognosis given, the professor stood and faced the Slytherin Prefect. "Prefect Zabini, Prefect Weasley, step forward."

Arthur had been confused by Zabini saying Weasley until right now, understanding that the tall blonde girl was probably another cousin of the massive Weasley clan. When both students were standing in front of him, Longbottom gave each a tap on the head with his wand and Arthur felt something radiate through their robes: probably from the prefect badges they both wore.

"Tell the truth, Zabini?"

"I saw two Gryffindor students accosting a First Year from my house, professor. He was trying to say something but Potter disarmed him and Weasley fired a hex."

"Miss Weasley?"

"James and I saw a flash and heard our cousin Rose scream. When we got here, she was crying on the floor and the Slytherin had his wand still out."

Longbottom seemed to consider both partial stories for a moment, and right when Arthur expected to be called on to give his own version of the story, he was stunned when the Professor passed judgement.

"I've already taken ten points from Gryffindor, and I'm going to take five from Slytherin. Magic in the halls is expressly forbidden and fighting can get you suspended or worse." Arthur found this decidedly unfair and almost choked trying to say as much. "Mister Kirkland and Miss Weasley, you will both be serving detention with me tomorrow night at the green houses after dinner. Bring your wands and herbology kits, understood?"

"B-But Professor-"

"That was not an invitation to argue, Miss Weasley. Mister Kirkland, do you understand?"

"Yes Professor." He understood how being a child again was an absolutely wretched fate to endure, because neither first year was so much as given a chance to defend themselves. It was poison.

And it was only October.

This was Hogwarts.
Lovino's care packages were part of what helped snub the loneliness of staying at the school. It wasn't that Feliciano lacked people to talk to, but there was an isolating effect of being so far from home for so long.

The weather was different, the food was different, the language, the culture, the architecture, the people themselves: all so different.

Not bad!

Just, not like home.

So it was nice to have Lovino scream at him in their language through an enchanted letter. Would a phone-call have been nicer? Obviously. But electronics didn't work in the castle and leaving the school was forbidden until Christmas break. Professor Malfoy had already spoken to him about the Howlers once however, and Feliciano had made a point when mailing back the completed government paperwork that his brother had to keep out words in Italian that were recognizable in English: bastard being the top priority.

The delivery of important documents from Rome was surprisingly light this week, the equivalent of Lovino sending him "no homework" to do on top of light readings and essays for Hogwarts classes. Feliciano was happy enough about this that he tapped the last cannoli with his wand and charmed it to stay fresh for England, laughing with Scorpius about the huff the other nation had stormed off in before they left the great hall and followed the winding corridors down to find the doors leading out to the quidditch pitch.

"You really like quidditch, don't you?" It was a long walk from the castle across the grounds to the towers of the quidditch stadium, but Flying lessons were for first years only and Professor Desford had a passion for the wizarding sport that matched most of her students'.

When England and Rose Weasley showed up five minutes late with a note from Professor Longbottom excusing their tardiness, Feliciano almost fell off his broom before they were even in the air.


"Yes, me!" England sniped, green eyes doing a thing that was kind of scary as he snatched the school broom out of Feliciano's hands and made him go back to collect a different one. Meanie.
"Shut up about it and I'll tell you everything later."

Professor Desford was a spry witch with blonde hair she kept pinned and bundled up behind her head, flying goggles on her forehead and robes cut white and black like a racing flag. She was probably their most excitable teacher, always smiling, and eager for any opportunity to get herself and the rest of them off the ground.

"Relays today!" She was also the school's representatives from the Quidditch League, something that made Feliciano slightly uncomfortable. If Hogwarts lost its status the way he'd threatened back in July, her job would be one of the first ones cut. "First years can't play quidditch, but we can still toughen you up for next year!"

The objective for the day was simple: with a wave of her wand Professor Desford called up several dozen multi-coloured smoke rings on both sides of the quidditch pitch, ranging in height from just above the ground to way up over the goal posts. They were each one solid colour in a rainbow
gradient from deep dark crimson all the way to a neon violet all the way at the other end. The rings formed two oscillating loops, so hopefully neither set of students would go flying into each other.

"A seeker skill-builder!" She exclaimed, almost as happy as some of the more quidditch-apt students in both Slytherin and Gryffindor robes. "There are two golden snitches buzzing around on a set course through these hoops, your job is to catch it before completing the circuit! When you catch it, swap out, and if you fail, swap and wait for another chance! Whichever team gathers the most points before time runs out will win ten house points!"

Flying was one of those awkward skills that Feliciano both enjoyed and yet wanted to stay away from. He loved the speed and the power of it, swooping and diving and being in control, but at the same time there was something about a broomstick that was utterly alien to him and he couldn't say he liked it.

He'd flown his air force's jet fighters, he'd sailed ships for centuries, building up cars and racing them against his brother and the other nations was one of his favourite adventurous pass-times.

A broom was just a big stick with a stocky end. There were proper ways to hold your feet but they were nothing like mounting a horse. The control aspect came more from shifting the body's weight like on a motorcycle, but there wasn't enough bulk underneath like a real engine to ground the rider and keep the motions stable.

It was a little bit too much like controlled falling...

But that didn't mean he wasn't going to do well.

"Bet I catch a snitch before you do." He teased, trying to get England to brighten up just a little bit where he was a furious, scowling mound of hatred clutching his broom and standing in line behind him.

"Bet you eat dirt and go back to the dorms crying." Rude! "Take a look over at Gryffindor: we're flying against Potter and his mother played for the national team."

"You're still rude." Feliciano scolded, turning back around as Higgs kicked off into the air and went screaming at a very awkward angle trying to hit the first ring without swooping too wide.

"Rest your weight, Charles, come on..." And Scorpius was practically on his toes behind Eliza, bouncing and muttering under his breath showing just how much he knew about the sport and technique.

Remembering something as it looked like Higgs was trying to take his time and fly straight instead of fly fast, Feliciano tug the enchanted sweet out of his pocket where he'd wrapped it in a napkin from the great hall. Offering it behind him, England didn't seem to notice it for a minute or two before finally taking it.

"...Thanks."

"They're better than chocolate!" Flashing a grin over his shoulder once Eliza was off, it was cute watching England's young, round little face try and get a proper bite out of the cannoli and chew without being spotted by their professor.

"One point, Gryffindor! Release and let the next one go!"

"C'mon, Gamp!"
"Point to Slytherin! Get on your broom, Mister Malfoy!"

He didn't need telling twice and Feliciano thought he felt a backwards gust of air before Scorpious was off with his lean body hugging the broom as Eliza Gamp stumbled with her broom in hand, cheeks flushed and grinning at the rest of them.

In the air, Scorpious went too fast and missed the first ring, but corrected for it and began swooping and diving to get back in line with his target.

Now that there was no one in front of him, it was a lot scarier seeing just how steep some of the dives and turns were. This really wasn't his sport.

"Don't let Potter beat you, I wish it was Weasley, but-"

"He's got it! Go, Vargas!"

His hands were looking for handles to rev and keep him grounded, he wanted more than the silent half-hum of the broom under him as his thighs closed and awkwardly slipped around the too-slim body of the shaft. Awful things, broomsticks.

He kicked off and felt the wind hiss between himself and the stick, a cushion of air that would slow him down but keep him stable as he rose straight up off the ground and refused to look down as his head passed through the first dark red band of smoke and he threw his weight around to the left before breaking into a spiralling dive.

He didn't get dizzy easily, and the forces trying to rip him off the broom just gave him a sense of stability as his eyes focused on the next ring and he passed through that by pulling out of the dive. Orange fell behind him and he came around wide to slide through yellow when something thunked him between the eyes.

A walnut-sized piece of gold bounced off his forehead with a painful crack and Feliciano completely forgot that he was supposed to try and catch it, he had a harder time getting his eyes open again and pulling his limbs in close when he felt the broom going straight up in the air instead of following a smooth angle down towards the light green ring. Growling under his breath, he set his chest and belly against the polished wood and rocketed forward, knowing he couldn't turn around and hoping the snitch was faster than he was and would make a full circuit first.

"Faster! Faster!" How much faster did they want him to go? All three green rings passed in a blur and the first blue was so far down his elbow almost skidded across the grass before he zig-zagged over the ground to hit the next two, the first purple ring blossoming ten feet over his head when he kicked off the ground and shot straight up.

This time he saw the snitch, catching sight of its yellow glitter against the second to last smoke ring. Instead of rushing him this time, the enchanted ball sped away.

"Oh no you-" Faster? Fine, he could do faster, eyes narrowed against the wind and hands twisting around the head of the broomstick like he could work more speed out of it like the handles of a motorcycle, ankles tucked in hard as if imagining a horse's flanks.

It was a straight-away to the final ring, and that was when something wrong happened.

The snitch was enchanted to follow a path through the rings and just keep doubling back and forth, but it went from being the bull's-eye in the target of the last indigo ring to firing off across the pitch leaving Feliciano with a clear view of the ring and the watching crowd of students down below.
Instead of the bell she always used for relays, Professor Desford blew her whistle.

And for a reason Lovino would give him hell for next week, Feliciano followed the snitch.

He cut across the air and when the snitch dove he followed it again, spinning around until his right side was parallel with the ground and he felt his core muscles straining with his legs to let one of his hands up to reach and make a grab.

The snitch shot left and his ankle hooked under the broom jerked the back end up like the rear wheels of a race-car, the stick drifting sideways before finding the magical equivalent of grip and shooting him straight again.

His fingertips brushed the gold case and then everything crashed with an explosion of gold pieces and shredded turf.

The last thing he knew he saw was two snitches hovering in front of him, and then a lot of sky before he shut his eyes and felt himself tumbling rapidly across the ground, his shoulder screaming before an awful stab lanced him through the side and he was crashing over and under another fast-moving body.

His broom was gone and his arms wrapped around something big and heavy before he flipped over one more time and his shoulders slammed the ground, skidding with dirt and grass everywhere, and finally came to a stop.

"Vargas!" He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see anything but brilliant light and the hazy outline of the goal-posts. "Potter! You there- Higgs! Fly up to the infirmary- fourth floor!"

There was blood in his mouth and that was why he couldn't breathe: it was going down his throat- or was it coming up it? He had to get the weight off his torso, his mind thinking of shrapnel and the carnage of a wreck before he remembered broomsticks didn't have debris.

His hands hit something too soft for twisted metal and then stopped. If he was injured, then so was the child resting on top of him. He wouldn't die from this, but humans were much more fragile.

"Albus! Albus oh my god!" Feliciano must have crossed into the Gryffindor circuit; it was the only explanation he could think of as he closed his eyes against the bright white sky and used one shaking hand to wipe his mouth. Don't let there be blood, and don't let the child die for his mistake.

"Vargas? Feli can you hear me?" That was Scorpius' voice and his small hands grabbing Feliciano's shoulder. He reached up and touched the boy's arm, trying to nod his head a little and waiting for the throbbing in his skull to go away. Albus' weight was taken off of him and that made everything a lot better.

His mental catalogue started working. Nothing broken, just a few bruises; his shoulder was sore but the muscles remained whole. He'd nearly snapped his collarbone, but he'd landed just right on the ground and he'd be alright.

Something had tried to impale his side and left one side of his leg numb. When his other hand touched the place where a black bruise had tried to puncture him, it was just the right size for a broomstick's rounded head.

"Bit my tongue." He lied, rolling over before Desford could tell him not to and spitting blood out on the grass. The bleeding was from deeper inside, but he couldn't conjure up the memories or the know-how right now to say it was safe to receive a magical healing.
"Potter caught the snitch!"

"Albus, can you bend your wrist?" He was in a lot of pain, but when he opened his eyes this time it was already starting to go away. He could see better, enough to know that he had to take the handkerchief someone handed him and quickly spit as much of the blood in his mouth out onto the grass before wiping the residue away. The bleeding would stop in a few minutes.

"N-No, ma'am..."

"He caught the snitch!"

"Just stand up slowly now... Alright. Vargas, let me have a look at you."

"Professor! Professor Desford, Albus caught the snitch, that means we get an extra point, don't we?"

"A point?" There was a sudden drop in volume when Desford asked her question, her hands on Feliciano's shoulder trying to make him roll back over so she could get a look at him when she froze. "An extra point? You're asking me about points when two of your classmates are injured and one of them is bleeding out his nose, Mister Thomas? Fine then: five points from Gryffindor for atrocious sportsmanship, does that satisfy you or should I take more?"

"My cousin just snapped his wrist in half and all you care about is winning a stupid relay?" That voice sounded like Rose Weasley, but Feliciano was distracted by Professor Desford looking down and telling him to lay on his back again so she could do a quick check. If he hadn't been pint-sized, Feliciano might have mentioned how pretty her grey eyes were: much nicer than looking at the sky, but he preferred it when she smiled.

"Ve... Professor, I'm sorry." Speaking was hard and he felt the blood come up a little higher, but he forced himself to swallow it and saw the concern rewrite itself over her face. When he tried to pick himself up, she immediately pressed down on his shoulders. "I can get up, I'm alright. I should say sorry for hitting Potter."

"You landed on your neck, Mister Vargas, you aren't moving until Professor Malfoy gets here." His neck was perfectly fine though, he knew what a snapped spine felt like: he just couldn't say as much without causing an even bigger scene. "And you didn't hit Potter: it was the other way around."

"I flew into his space-"

She didn't want him to talk because she really did think he was seriously injured. Paralysis could be fixed with magic- sometimes, and Feliciano was almost embarrassed by her concern until he heard footsteps and saw Albus Potter come and stand over him. He could see part of his reflection in Potter's square glasses, and that was enough to remind him that he didn't look like a man to Professor Desford, he was just a very small boy who'd just been pummelled into the ground.

"I... I'm really sorry, Vargas." Albus was holding his wrist awkwardly, his other arm supporting the limb with Rose standing right behind him. She wasn't pushing her cousin forward though, it was more like she was hiding behind him as Feliciano noticed England sitting behind him over his shoulder, watching both of them very carefully. "I dove without looking ahead, my mum'll be so mad when she finds out: it was careless. I'm sorry."

"Va bene, Potter. It only hurts a little bit. Is your wrist-?"

The stare he got from the professor shut him up for good this time, but Feliciano kept a close eye on her as he very slowly lifted one arm up, reaching without letting his shoulders come off the ground for Potter to take his hand and shake. He was in more pain the longer he laid and let the bruises form
and muscles stiffen up against the cold ground, but whatever had torn and bled inside him was beginning to clot and fix itself up already. Nations didn't make a habit of staying down for long, especially not from sports injuries.

Professor Desford stood all at once and swept away, giving England the opportunity to quickly hunch down over his head and whisper at him.

"How much more time do you need?"

"I'm fine, really." He could have stood up at the same time Potter did, but now England was giving him a rotten scowl.

"You skidded back almost ten yards after being slammed directly from above. You're not that resistant!"

"Shows what you know!" He hissed back.

"Kirkland! I just told you not to touch him!"

England's face vanished and Feliciano was left looking at the bright sky again, a bit of black hair telling him Potter was still lingering while Higgs was off trying to get Gamp to stop crying again. It was nice to know a pretty girl like that was worrying, but when he heard students parting it was hard not to look up at Professor Malfoy.

"I thought you said the students were following a circuit?" Scorpius' father was speaking to Professor Desford, but although it looked like he acknowledged Potter's injury, he knelt next to Feliciano first.

"The snitches broke free, and screamed right at each other. Of course the boys followed but I have no idea how it happened."

"We'll deal with it later then." And then those cold grey eyes came down on him properly. Professor Malfoy's flaxen hair was pulled back as always, not moving even when he knelt down with his wand in one hand and flicked a speck of dirt off Feliciano's robe. "Taking a nap in the middle of class, Vargas?"

"Just a short one, sir." The wand touched the middle of his forehead, then pulsed again over his throat. It was a bead of warmth that was a little uncomfortable because it soaked straight through his skin. Invasive in nature but intimate in purpose, it got harder to breathe again when the wand tapped the talisman under his clothes and the normally cold cross went hot.

Of course, the professor noticed the reaction. He looked Feliciano dead in the eye again, said nothing, and brushed it off as just a good luck charm before tapping again over each of his shoulders and then sitting back up.

"He seems alright."

"Are you sure?" Professor Desford didn't sound like she was criticizing him, just baffled. "Draco these boys came hurtling at each other at full speed!"

"And Mister Vargas has the bruises to prove it, especially here." If he'd been able to see Professor Malfoy's hand moving he would have done anything to stop it, because the Healer pressed two fingertips hard against his side and the nation yelped loudly and spasmed trying to get up away from the pain. England was right there to take his hand when Feliciano was clawing for something to help lever him up, and he made it all the way to his knees before hearing Professor Malfoy chuckle behind him.
"If the soreness is too much then he can come up to the infirmary for proper treatment. As for the blood, he either chipped a tooth or bit his tongue, and as we can all see he speaks just fine despite it. Potter..."

Feliciano stopped listening, he was too busy padding down his robes looking for his wand, still on his knees and covered in crushed grass and wet dirt. If he didn't get rid of the metallic taste in his mouth he was going to be sick.

"Oh, just open up," He looked around and saw England's wand pointing at him.

"Ve- aaagah!"

Coughing hurt! Coughing hurt a whole lot! Coughing made his tender ribs rub the wrong way and set his shoulders and back on fire! It didn't help at all that he was choking on a stream of cold water that England shot right at his mouth!

"Better?"

Feliciano had to think all the way back to Lovino's howler before, in Italian, he told England exactly what kind of friend he really was.
Ultimately, Italy did end up having to go to the infirmary for more care, not because he actually needed it, but because Professor Desford escorted the Slytherins to their Defense Against the Dark Arts class with the Ravenclaw first years and told Professor Creevey exactly what had happened on the quidditch pitch. The two of them discussed things quietly by the door, but Arthur still heard the entire exchange.

"Professor Desford, if Professor Malfoy says he's alright then-"

"Dennis..!"

So not only did Feliciano miss Defense Against the Dark Arts, he also missed lunch along with Professor Malfoy and Desford again who were both absent from the high table during the meal. When he didn't show up to Transfiguration that afternoon, the rest of their class went back to the Slytherin Common Rooms to wait for dinner and their late night Astronomy lesson without him.

"There you are!"

Except the idiot was already in the common room waiting for them, tormenting his cat with a crumpled ball of paper bewitched to dance and wiggle across the floor in time with his wand flicking back and forth. Older Slytherin students filed in and out without really noticing him where Feliciano had taken a seat under one of the glowing green windows. He had his textbooks all stacked up neatly showing he'd probably finished off the day's homework before playing with the cat: Arthur spotted a bundle of printed office memos that had slipped off his lap and gotten stuck in the side of his chair, so obviously he was just finding excuses not to work.

"Feeling better, Vargas?" Arthur asked, dropping into the chair across from him and swinging his feet up onto the low table. The girls went off sighing about something and Higgs heard his name called across the room and left. Scorpius had to drag a chair over to join them, and he had somehow found his chess board already in case either of them wanted to play.

"I felt fine before even leaving. How was Defense class?"

Feliciano's cat-charm was abandoned when the three of them habitually performed the draw to see who would get first go with the chess board. Since there were three of them and the colour of the wand tip was random, it was like throwing rock-scissors-paper until Arthur and Scorpius were left setting the pieces up and starting a game.

"Dad- eh... Professor Malfoy sometimes complains about Professor Desford, she's always like that when it comes to injuries in quidditch." Pawns started creeping across the board and Arthur sent his bishop out to set up position, keeping the conversation going while Italy bundled his cat up in his arms and rubbed the dopey, attention-hogging animal all over while it purred.

"What have you been doing all this time? Did the Professor pour a bunch of medicines down your throat?"

"He made me drink something when Professor Desford was still there, but I think it was just pumpkin juice. When she left he sent me to go get cleaned up and then sit on one of the beds with my Transfiguration homework."

Arthur held Italy's gaze for a few moments over Scorpius' head, watching Italy's peppy grin fade a little when he opened his eyes seriously and gave a shallow nod that no one else was supposed to
see. It meant he felt everything was still okay with the Slytherin professor, which was exactly what Arthur wanted to hear. The last thing they needed was a professor getting suspicious of how quickly a set of deep bruises had healed, or to bring the Headmistress down into their affairs again. If Minerva McGonagall never heard the name "Vargas" in her office again, she'd probably live at least ten years longer.

"So how did you end up getting detention?"

Arthur relayed that story between commands for his pieces to move and back Scorpius up into a tiny corner of the board. He was too late to stop Italy from leaning over and whispering something to the boy because of it, and gave his wand a threatening wave in the Italian's direction when Scorpius's knight smashed through the rook keeping his queen trapped against the edge of the board. He still wound up winning the game, but the White Queen did a great deal of damage to his army before that finally happened.

Scorpius and Italy's game was interrupted by the call to go to dinner, and then the Slytherin and Hufflepuff first years hurrying up the stairs to get to the Astronomy Tower. Astronomy had to be one of the most relaxing subjects that he or Italy had to take after centuries of star-gazing, perfectly configured star-charts handed over to their Professor before Arthur was forced to say good night to the rest of his classmates and take a different path through the castle to reach the green houses.

They were probably going to be weeding flower pots in Greenhouse two, or mixing fertilizer by hand for an hour. Detention really didn't mean that much to him anymore. If he wanted to put himself in a bad mood then he'd rather ask why two bewitched gold balls had suddenly broken free of their enchantments and gone screaming across the pitch at each other to cause the collision. If he wanted to stay in a good mood, Arthur just had to glance up at the sky as he found the cold October night again and admire Mars hovering in its usual patch of inky black.

He had to admit, it was quite nice to be far from the London lights on clear evenings like this.

"Kirkland."

"Miss Weasley."

They met each other outside the greenhouses where the glass structures stood in neat rows, Rose Weasley's black robes closed tight around her to keep the chill air at bay.

"Your friend, he's...?" Hmph, she wouldn't say his name and Arthur wasn't in the mood to go having the same argument all over again. He'd rather look for constellations than let his blood-pressure get run up by her again.

"Feliciano's quite alright, he spent the afternoon doing homework and drinking pumpkin juice. Potter?"

"He's fine too." There. Civil conversation complete, the two of them simply stood outside and waited.

Professor Longbottom didn't take much longer to appear, he came from the direction of Greenhouse 5, not the castle like the two of them had expected. There was a white flame kept in a glass jar swinging from his belt, hands full of something as he walked up to them and seemed pleased that they were both on time.

"Alright, no need to look so glum." He handed both of them a short, dull knife and a metal pail, then gestured for the two of them to light up their wands and follow him across the damp lawn. "I've told
Hagrid off for the night to get some rest, he's not as spry as he once was and Halloween's always extra tiring for him. Tonight's chore is rather tedious, but not very hard, stick close to me and you'll both be safe."

"We..." Rose swallowed her words before trying again, something darker than the sky looming ahead of them as Arthur felt his good mood starting to wane. "We're going into the forest, aren't we?"

"Not very deep, but yes." Spectacular.

"Professor Slughorn needs more moon-wart for the Advanced Potions class, and since it's safe enough to gather that's what you'll be helping me with tonight." Safe enough he said, leading them right up to the edge of the woods where the bushes began to grow and the lush grass gave way to brambles and bare earth. Longbottom doused the flame at his hip with a word and stood there in silence for a moment, the starlight and ambient glow of the castle filtering down slowly until a new glow calmly began to form.

The moon-wart was a dusty blue sparkle, a lichen of sorts that had absorbed enough magical energy to shimmer on its own. Longbottom picked up a large rock with some of it stuck on the bottom and showed them how to use the dull, notched knives he'd given them to scrape the substance off into the buckets.

"We won't be out here all night, but I'd like to bring at least a cup or two back to him tomorrow morning."

"We're going to split up, but not too far." A wave of his wand put a spot of red light on Rose's robes between her shoulder blades, a green one on Arthur's back, and then a rather large white ring over Professor Longbottom's back so he was the brightest of the three. "If at any point either of you can't see me, I want you to send up white sparks from your wand, understand?"

He had them practice twice in front of him, just to make sure they could perform the simple task.

"If I lose sight of either of you and you don't answer your name, I'll send up yellow and I want you to come back immediately." Simple enough then. "If you're in danger, red sparks as big and high as you can. Try it now."

Rose sent a gout of red sparks over their heads about seven feet high, Arthur copied her but pride made him add an extra two feet of height before a soft pop made them explode like fireworks.

"Exactly like that, and make the bang louder if you can." Ideally they wouldn't have to, but Longbottom led them carefully along the first path that took them just inside the trees, telling them to keep the castle lights in view as well so they wouldn't get completely lost.

"Try not to use too much light, it scares the moon-wart."

Arthur was quite pleased to be working alone even if it was tedious and slow going. His eyes were good enough to tell the difference between moon glow and the florescent blue sparkle he was supposed to be looking for, but the task required just enough concentration that his mind couldn't wander as far as he wanted it to. He was mentally reviewing what he'd seen in Scotland's package of paperwork, trying to remember what exactly his transcription of France's speech had said when he heard something rustle.

Standing up straight, it was troubling to be so short when the shrubs and bushes came up almost high enough to cover his head. Spinning around, he saw Longbottom's glow and quickly took a few steps
in that direction.

The loud snap and pop of breaking branches made him spin around with his wand out, the knife hitting the ground because it's cutting edge was as useless as his eyes trying to see straight through the shadowed woods.

"Invader..."

"Hogwarts itself is my sponsor!" There was absolutely no playing around when a voice like the heavy weight of dead wood touched him in the night. He knew what kinds of creatures lived in the school's Forbidden Forest, and whatever charms he was wearing would only confuse them, not stop them from knowing exactly what he was supposed to be. "I am here to protect and to learn, not bring harm."

"Liar."

"Says a coward! Show yourself before you challenge me!"

Footsteps, but not the easy rhythm of two feet finding purchase over fallen logs and dead branches: the repetitive clop of four hooves cutting into the soft earth. A moonbeam struck down on a bare chest wearing black curls, strong muscles flexing and tense where a male torso broke down into the strong body of a tall stag. The centaur's bearded face was square, blue eyes glowing over straight bare teeth that glowed white with the dim light.

Centaurs were connected to the land, and they were anything but stupid.

"The land quakes where you walk, you bring nothing but fear in your wake."

"The Scottish Highlands do not fear me, he fears that I will fail in my task." The centaur didn't answer him right away, but it wasn't the sort of pause to suggest deep thought. The watch around Arthur's wrist felt hot and tight where he was holding his wand in the same hand, but he didn't let the point waver. "My brother trusts me to protect Hogwarts the same way I trust him to protect the whole of Britain in my stead."

"Who brings the fear?"

"Someone like me, but the darkness is not-"

"Kirkland!"

"Who brings the darkness?"

"I have to go, the professor-" a brilliant wave of gold light somewhere between the trees made the centaur's blue eyes narrow dangerously, his front legs buckling down as his muscled arms came up with fists. He asked his question again like he was ready to charge.

"Who brings the darkness!"

"Kirkland!"

Arthur pulled his arm back and cut the air with his wand, red light pouring from the tip before he shot his flare straight up past the centaur's head. It didn't just pop this time; it exploded like a can of compressed air and washed the trees in alarmed crimson. He didn't even wait to see his own spell through, dropping the metal bucket and spinning so fast his feet slipped on the mulch before he tore off past the trees at a dead sprint.
The first thing his eyes found was two trees growing as a V and his small body shot straight through them, hooves pounding the earth behind him fast enough to over-take him before the sound of ripping bark said he wasn't safe. As a child he was too small to take the large fallen tree in front of him at a leap so he threw his weight back and skidded over the dirt and needles to slide under it, his wand firing another gout of red so Longbottom would know where the hell he'd gone.

He came out from under the log at the same time the centaur's hooves slammed the ground from a high jump, and still on his back he rolled to the left and found his feet again, sprinting back towards the school and the brilliant gold light that was shining like a beacon to help him find his way. The light had to mean safety because a pale pink flash of light shot past him and he heard the centaur yell in anger as he was hit with the jinx, Arthur's little legs catching on roots and throwing him down so he had to claw and scramble with his wand still in hand trying to reach safety.

A shield spell locked over him so hard he might have turned into a clam, but his greatest protection was Longbottom's voice roaring through the light:

"In the name of Hogwarts Witchcraft and Wizardy, you will call off your attack!" and then the Professor himself standing over him, wand out and eyes locked on the thrashing beast lost in the foliage behind them.

"Release me, Wizard!"

"Give me your name!"

"No!" Arthur looked back over his shoulder, wary of standing up too soon and leaving the protection of the shield until he saw what Longbottom had done. The centaur was slamming his two front hooves on the ground like he was praying, knees bound together with a leg-lock charm that kept him down in what looked like a painful position for a creature like him.

"Then you already know how you've dishonoured yourself and your herd. I brought these students to the forest with Magorian's blessing, and you've made him a liar!"

The centaur stopped thrashing, and the shield spell slowly began to fade along with the blinding yellow light once things started to calm. Longbottom never took his eyes off the centaur, but his free hand grabbed at Arthur's robes until he picked himself up and hurried behind the Professor where Rose Weasley was waiting, stunned, under another shield charm that opened up to let him in.

"My name is Gorin, son of Ronan."

There was another flash of pink off Professor Longbottom's arm as he swished his wand quickly in front of him, the leg-lock curse vanishing at once and letting the centaur's legs come apart and hold his weight again properly.

"Return to your people then, son of Ronan, and we will do the same."

There was a tense moment where the two stood off against each other, but the centaur lost because instead of holding the professor's gaze the entire time, he broke eye contact to stare straight through Arthur like he could lift the charm on his body just by glaring it into submission. The nation didn't bend, and with a loud huff the centaur kicked up his front legs and turned around towards the forest, thumping off with angry hoof-beats until they were left in silence and shadow.

"You two stay here. Don't make a sound, I'll be right back."

Professor Longbottom wasn't gone for very long, but when he returned he was holding the bucket Arthur had dropped before fleeing. He didn't know if the professor had found the knife too, but he
didn't say anything about it as the shield charm and the lights fixed to their robes were all waved away.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Kirkland, but I've never seen anybody run like that before."

"You've never seen Vargas at break time, have you, Professor?" Not the perfect time for a joke, but Longbottom simply looked at him for a moment before letting a half-smile pull at his face. He even brought a hand down on Arthur's head to ruffle his hair. It was offensively kind of him, and he picked up the other two buckets he hadn't seen at Rose's feet before leading them out of the forest and back up to the castle. He didn't even detour to drop the materials back off at the greenhouses, just kept walking while Rose continued to stare at Arthur silently for the entire trek.

"I'm afraid the Headmistress will have to be told about this, but despite it being Halloween I'd rather save the inquiry for tomorrow." Once they were back inside, Professor Longbottom was all easy smiles again when he turned around to look at them. "Miss Weasley, I think you've learned your lesson about fighting in the halls so you're free to head back up to Gryffindor tower. I'll escort Mister Kirkland back down to the dungeons, I need to drop all of this off at Slughorn's office anyways."

"Yes, Professor." Now that they were back inside, it was clear Rose Weasley was looking a little pale and rather unsure of herself. She nodded goodnight to Longbottom, looked at Arthur, and didn't seem to know what to do. "Um- good night then."

"Goodnight." She stumbled off and left without another word, and not being in the mood to talk Arthur started walking with the Professor back down into the dungeons.

Sadly, they weren't quite all the way there when Arthur had to stop and say something, eyes closed and words stopped up in his throat because he didn't know how to put them. Damn this childish form for not having enough energy to see him through a long day.

"Professor Longbottom, I don't mean to be rude, sir, but-"

"Yes, Kirkland?"

"I, well, you see sir..."

"Is this about Gorin's actions tonight? I've never seen one of their kind act like that before, if I'd thought there was any chance of either of you getting more than a splinter or a twisted ankle in the dark I-"

"Professor please-" God, there was going to be no way for him to explain this if he said it. This was only the second month of their first year in this place and if Arthur said the words that were bubbling up now that would mean another six years of not being able to explain himself.

He just wanted to say 'don't send me in to the forest again for any reason'.

He just had to beg 'for Hogwarts' sake sir, whatever you do, don't ever send Vargas into the forest'.

But how was an eleven-year-old boy supposed to know enough about Scottish centaurs to tell his professor that the Italian student would be targeted and attacked far more ruthlessly than the English one had been tonight? It wasn't Arthur's fault Italy was carrying such an angry burden, literally, around his neck, but he was supposed to risk undermining this entire initiative just to protect him?

And when did Vargas ever get in trouble with anybody except Desford for sneaking out of his hospital bed because his injuries were already healed? In what twisted world would Italy ever end up irritating Longbottom of all teachers, the one who wouldn't have given detention at all if he hadn't
Caught Prefects throwing spells at each other in the halls?

"Kirkland?"

It just wasn't worth six years of grief to stop something that didn't have a chance of ever happening.

So to cover up all of his own foolish interruptions, Arthur opened his eyes up as wide as could be, took a few shallow breaths to make himself look flush, and lied.

"Please, Professor Longbottom I know it's a bother but- please, may I go up to the Owlery tonight and send a letter to my brother? It's after hours and all, but..." He even worked up a tear and did his best to wipe it away as fast as possible. "Please sir."

And sure enough...

"That's not a bother at all, Mister Kirkland." Neville Longbottom really did have the kindest of smiles when he felt like sharing them, much different from the bellowing voice of the forest. "I can take you there myself once I drop these off for Slughorn. Go get your things and I'll meet you in the great hall, in five minutes, alright?"

"Thank you, sir."

"Not at all, Kirkland. Run along now."

And he did.

"Don't go into the forest."

"Huh-?" Feliciano didn't have the head for England's crazy talk at too-early in the morning when the other nation shook him awake and whispered through the darkness at him with a warning.

"Whatever you do, so long as we're here as students, don't go into the forbidden forest."

"It's forbidden, why would I ever...?"

"Just don't."

That was literally all England was willing to say on the matter, which was even more frustrating than being woken up. Feliciano just had to press his face back down into his pillow, pull an arm around his familiar, and try to get back to sleep before the Giant Squid could come floating by their window to make a big fuss and wake them up for lessons.

Halloween at Hogwarts was worth writing back home about, because the holiday wasn't much of a holiday in his country. Pumpkins big enough to stand in, carved with freaky faces and enchanted to sing along under the floating candles that lit the great hall in its black and orange banners. Funny songs and enough food that Feliciano actually found a few things that pleased his pallet while students unveiled charms and games that left them laughing until they were too tired to think straight.

"Has anyone seen the Bloody Baron?" and ghosts, so many ghosts, funny and scary and good-natured and foul, all hovering about and poking their heads out of plates of food, washing themselves over students to get howls of surprise and laughter out of them. It was memorable, if a bit terrifying.

"Which one's the Baron?" He asked Zabini over an overflowing cup of pumpkin juice. The Prefect
had been smiling, but then he'd stopped and asked his question.

"Our house ghost, but I haven't seen him yet tonight."

"I haven't seen him in weeks, to be honest."

And Feliciano had never seen him at all, which was why he forgot about the conversation completely as November opened up and broke the pattern of Howlers with Sunday breakfast.

"For the first time in over 100 years you won't be with me when I stand guard to remember them."

Lovino's letter was long and carefully worded. It wasn't typed like some of the additional notes he often sent were, but hand-written on several sheets of their finest stationary, sealed with a stamp ring that was as old as their union as North and South Italy.

The next time the older students went down to Hogsmeade for an afternoon, Feliciano dug out the only gold galleon he'd brought with him to the school and asked the Slytherin Head Girl to please buy him a bottle of quality black ink and several sheets of excellent paper from the shop in town. Most first years usually asked for candy or games, but the Head Girl was less likely than the Prefects to pocket the change for the purchase, and the way he quietly asked her seemed to leave a solemn impression on the request.

His letter back to Rome for Remembrance Day wasn't quite as long as Lovino's because after the sentiment there wasn't as much for him to report back about. He did spend the rest of that night awake and standing by the fire in the common room, and with England to explain just enough to the other first years, he was left to hold his vigil all night without interruption.

He was back to his usual self the next day, if a bit sleepy for the long hours remembering the hiss of rain on smooth concrete and the creak of military boots, the melancholy of standing guard over a different flame in his capital fading by the next howler's arrival.

A week later he returned the favour for England, and the rest of November passed without comment.

He hadn't forgotten why they were going through with all of this though, not by a long shot. The Head Girl was a seventh year and Feliciano made the effort to fetch things for her when she needed something, or to make his reports to her especially so she'd remember him as that nice first year. Finally, with the first cold snow fall settling over the castle, Feliciano climbed up from the boys dorms late one night to find her sitting over a long parchment scroll, quill forgotten between her fingertips as she stared out one of the green windows at the ripples of the lake swirling darkly over the common room.

Unhooking his wand case from where it was stowed under his sleeve, Feliciano took a breath and made his move.

"Miss Pucey?"

"Oh-! What are you doing up at this hour, Vargas? First years should all be abed right now!"

She was a pretty girl with a sad face. He hadn't noticed it right away what with being stepped on all the time and avoiding howlers (the last one had included a gout of flame that got him a scary look from Professor Malfoy), but the Head Girl's wide eyes were never really open all the way, usually looking down despite her rank and with a sigh that always clung to the end of her words. She was a very nice person from what he'd seen, sharp when she wanted to be and not shy enough to be pushed around: he'd seen one of the other first year girls try it and get hexed so badly it took both Prefects and the Head Boy's help to put her fingers back in order.
But she was sad, and the way she looked up every single time Feliciano let out a word of Italian encouraged him to just quietly take the chair next to her at the cluttered table and set his wand-case down over the scroll.

The leather was old, not ancient, but at least seven or eight years of abuse had left their mark on the brass nods and the strap that was worn all along the edges. There were creases across it that came from it being bent the wrong way at least once or twice: like someone had tried or even succeeded at snapping what was inside.

Really, more than the quality of the leather, Feliciano wanted her to see the ornate "M. R." stamped on the body of it.

When he looked back up at her, Pucey's lips were trapped between smiling and weeping, her eyes closing a little where there was a bit of shine and her cheeks were going red. She shook her head and then looked at him, one hand half-reaching for the case before he complied and quickly removed his wand from it.

"You're just a little boy, where did you get this?" She took the case into her hands like it was something precious, her voice fleeting and full of hurt as her ink-stained thumb brushed over the initials.

"The Vargas and Rosetti families know each other." He'd been distant from the magical community for a while, but the faded connection had burned brightly right before the house's collapse. "When his mother found out I was coming to Hogwarts, she let me have it." Or rather, he'd found it in what remained of their house after a domestic clash in a powerful household led to its complete destruction. The cross at least really had been a gift.

"You knew him too?"

"I don't remember him." He lied, because he'd never known Marco Rosetti when he'd been alive but he remembered everything he'd seen and learned after his death.

"He was so good." She wiped her tears off on the edge of her robe and Feliciano didn't have a handkerchief to offer her. "I shouldn't tell you this but- but we dated, him and I, for a while."

"A while?"

"Two- three years?" That was not a while, that was so much more than a while and as soon as she said it with a forced smile she covered her mouth with the back of her hand and coughed to hide a sob. "I'm- I'm very good with hexes, but I- Victoire Weasley you know, she's much better at counter-curses." The Gyrffindor Prefect..? "I spent half of fifth year with- with troll feet, it was impossible to show my face. Marco was always there and- he almost got expelled for dueling over it. I had to break up with him."

She shook her head very hard, a few locks of dark hair coming out of the heavy braid wound over her head. She closed her eyes and muffled her voice with her wrist and sleeve up over her face, she was going to regret what she said next but Feliciano still wanted to hear it.

"I shouldn't have done that..." Her voice came out so small, it was like someone had taken a baby bird and tossed it from the nest before it was ready. "I really wish- I wish I hadn't done that... "

"Did he say anything to you before he-?"

"No... No... He didn't have a chance..." She looked at him again but Feliciano knew she wasn't looking at him, there was no way for her eyes to really focus on him when she was staring down a
"I told him to never speak to me again, not even during lessons or here in the commons." He hated seeing her cry, he hated watching children cry... "I told him and then I got on the train home for summer- I cancelled my trip to Italy, I spent all of last year ignoring him and then- and then..."

He debated giving the wand case to her, he seriously considered it and the urge to do so was strong when she gave up and just sat there crying. He wanted to do it, but then he knew how dangerous that would be.

To give a young girl a memento of lost love was as much a kindness as a curse. If he gave her grief something to latch on to, especially growing up in the magical world, she would have to be strong enough to overcome it or the emotions would manifest into something terrible. It was already dangerous enough to carry a dead man's memento and walk the same halls that had killed him, to sleep in the same bed where his mind had been poisoned and rent itself to pieces. He couldn't pass that danger on to her.

"Sleep deeply, child."

Instead he cast a sleeping spell under his breath while she sat there sobbing, letting her tumble into a dreamless, restoring sleep and taking the case back to hide again up his robes. He weighed one more option in his mind before turning his back on her to assume she'd fallen asleep while studying, but then gave in to the idea.

He obliviated her. Not very hard, but the memory charm would take away at least her last hour or so of memories. She'd wake up with dry tears on her face and a half-finished History of Magic essay. The two would explain each other in the morning, and to make sure of it he tipped her ink-well over so it dribbled down the side of the page.

After that, Feliciano Vargas went back to being the errand-running Italian boy with the happy smile.

Italy had earned himself several nicknames that all failed to achieve the proper schoolyard sting concerning his weekly howlers. Arthur was actually getting bored listening to the Ravenclaws next to their table try to achieve anything that was better than "Fratelino Feliciano" because all that literally meant was "little brother Feliciano" in Italian and it was absolutely pathetic at riling the Slytherins up once Italy translated it after its first few days of use.

"It's kind of sweet when they call me that, like we're all one big family."

"Ew, gross, that's not it at all." Scorpius was laughing into his rice pudding as Feliciano swept the ash off the table from what would be South Italy's final howler of the semester, wand in hand to stave off anyone trying to touch the bubbling margarita pizza that materialized in front of him.

"Speaking of families though..."

Scorpius wasn't very good at starting conversations on his own. He usually waited for someone else to start talking and then followed their lead whether or not it was in a direction he wanted to go. To have him actually pick a topic and start in on it was worth listening to.

"Have either of your families decided what you're going to do over the holidays?" Arthur and Italy had made no secret of the fact that they were going home over Christmas. It was going to be exhausting, but Arthur could already see the airline crest printed on top of a digital print-out of Italy's plane ticket back to Rome. Whether Romano had purchased an adult or child seat would be the last
thing to decide whether Italy even bothered swinging back by Arthur's London townhouse before heading to the airport and out of the country.

"My family has the entire twelve days completely planned out, unfortunately." Not a lie in the least, but what followed next were white-lies all around. "Bristol for a Christmas party on the eighteenth, an old alumni celebration the next day in Edinburgh, then we'll be off to the continent for sightseeing in the Netherlands and skiing somewhere in the Alps." He couldn't quite remember if the G8 summit would be in Vienna or Zurich, so it was worth it to be vague.

"If you think my brother's howlers are bad, you'd have to see his face if I told him I wanted to leave Rome before the very last minute to catch the train!" Italy said it with a smile and a little laugh, but after his next bite of pizza he dusted the fresh flour off his fingertips before adding tact to his refusal. "Maybe next year, Scorpius. Sorry."

"No no, it's fine." He did look disappointed, but there was nothing either of them could do about it. They weren't really going to be on vacation by any stretch of the imagination. "I haven't even asked my parents yet if I can go inviting friends over, just felt like asking since the train's next week. I think we're going to France for a bit anyways."

It was sad to let the poor boy down like that, but when Christmas vacation did hit there was zero hesitation as they boarded the Hogwarts express from Hogsmeade and were whisked back south towards London through the snow and rain.

It put a small damper on things not being able to speak plainly to each other with Scorpius sharing their compartment. With what felt like the 'real world' looming only a few hours away the children's games felt stale, both of them losing terribly at exploding snap and taking forever to make their moves at chess before Scorpius awkwardly gave up and let all three of them just sit and suffer in silence. Arthur's mind was nagging to open his bag and pull out the muggle paperwork burning a hole in his mind, because as soon as he could get rid of this charm after four agonizing months of it he knew he'd be headed straight to West Minster to see what was happening in his office and get himself caught up on every issue or wrinkle in the international community.

And Italy was much the same way, except for him it wouldn't be as simple as hailing a taxi from the town-house's steps, but a taxi, then the airport, then the flight down to Rome before he either went home or straight to his own office. They were up for the very first leg of a very long trip home, and it was impossible to relate that sort of stress to a child like the little boy sharing their compartment.

It made Arthur once again deeply regret this entire operation, because Scorpius only continued to sit and suffer there with them because they all knew there was no place else for him to go. They were his school chums, his mates, his friends.

But he was a child, and they were nations.

It was all going to go terribly wrong at some point, Arthur could feel it almost as surely as he felt the transition between the Scottish lowlands and northern England. At least he was already home...

Platform 9 and 3/4s waited until the day was already over to materialize out the train windows, clouds of steam and crowds of waiting parents misted by foggy glass panes. Arthur forced himself to be a little bit more cheerful than he wanted to be and made himself laugh at one of Italy's jokes as they both tried to cheer Scorpius up after almost two hours of nervous fidgeting and stilted conversation.

Stepping foot on the platform, to their sweet relief, brought a familiar face in the crowd who was standing in a long black winter jacket with a blue scarf under his scruffy chin. Scotland raised a
gloved hand when he saw them in their compartment's window, and once the train came to a final stop and the doors opened to begin unloading students, he was able to collect Arthur's bags before they were even properly off the train.

"Here, eat this." There were no hellos or how-are-yous, just a paper-wrapped deli sandwich that was still warm from the oven that had toasted the bread and melted the cheese. Scotland shoved one at each of them and used his knee to help lever Italy's trunk up onto a trolley so they could get going. Gino the cat's kennel was handled with a bit more care, and Arthur was trying to maneuver his mouth around a steaming bite of hot ham and tomato as Scotland moved directly onto business.

"Your plane leaves in two hours, Vargas, your brother's in the car so-

"He's in London?"

"Of course I am!"

Arthur nearly choked on what was in his mouth when he heard the voice, and Italy almost leapt right out of his own skin when a bemused witch stepped out of the way of an irate young man in a tailored black jacket that was similar to Scotland's and yet so much more fashionable. There was at least one half-heard gasp and a gawking stare when South Italy's familiar voice cut the air, but he was just pulling off a pair of straight black sunglasses as he marched towards them and then stopped so he could stand there, hating everything around him.

"You-" And Italy was completely baffled, staring slack-jawed with his on-the-run dinner untouched and about to fall out of his hand. He had to blink twice and give his brother a complete once over from shoes to hair before he seemed to believe what he was seeing. "You're on the platform!"

"Yes, I'm on the fucking platform, merry Christmas to you too, asshole."

South Italy's response was an approximation for Arthur, because the older brother fired the words off in Italian and then opened his arms to catch the younger one when North Italy charged him and jumped up to get his arms around Romano's neck. The height difference between them had never been this dramatic before, and South Italy almost looked confused by the hug until something more important took over and he squeezed the small boy tight in his arms. Charmed effect or not, the embrace seemed to soothe both halves of the nation as they traded words and even a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Don't even think it, squirt." Scotland sighed, sounding fed up and exasperated already.

"I wasn't!" Arthur harshly rebuked. "Why do you have to ruin everything like that?"

"Waah! You're still a jerk!" Arthur looked back over and North Italy was on the ground, a look of pure betrayal on his face where South was pulling out his cellphone and looking annoyed at the complete lack of service on the platform.

"You're heavy, idiot. Now get up, we have to get out of here." Of course he'd catch his brother in a hug just to throw him down a minute later. Why else would Arthur be so wary of ever trying the same thing with Scotland?

"Two hours, people! Let's get going!"

"Mum! Mum! This way, they're over here!"

Scotland's declaration that they should leave at once through the crowd of wizarding folk was interrupted by a familiar young voice that caught Arthur and Feliciano's attention at once. When
Scorpius appeared through the crowd, a dignified witch somewhere in her late thirties hurried up behind him, dark lipstick looking classic on her full lips, brown hair done up with great care around her where a white mink hat was resting perfectly, the rest of her done up in a green winter robe with more white fur around the hem and cuffs. A Slytherin mother if there ever was one, Arthur was sure.

"Sorry," Scorpius panted, a hopeful kind of look in his eyes that Arthur found too crushing to ignore. "I know you said your vacation's fully booked, but-

"Astoria Malfoy, Scorpius's mother, a pleasure to meet you.” Mrs. Malfoy had the kind of confident smile that even Scotland found hard to ignore, his time-keeping skills not the best anyways as he lifted a hand off the trolley he'd been about to start pushing to accept the hand-shake, remembering almost too late to be polite and let it turn into a brief kiss on the back of her hand.

"Eeh-" He gave an awkward look at the Italian brothers, then remembered he still had the luxury of being an adult and found his voice. "Daniel Kirkland, the squirt's brother."

"Scorpius tells me you boys are heading out of town already, is that true?"

"Sadly, ma'am it is."

"Vargas, why are you crying?" Being at Scorpius' height, it was easier to hear him than to stare up and listen to Scotland and Mrs. Malfoy exchange pleasantries. And lo and behold, Vargas was in fact simpering over something.

"He shoved me... my sandwich is ruined." He'd fallen on it, obviously.

"You're pathetic. There's better food waiting at home and you know it." South Italy still couldn't get a signal and had put his phone away. He seemed vaguely interested in what was passing between the other two recognizable adults, but was obviously still eager to get going and the conflict was clear on his face. He always was a sucker for beautiful, fashionable women.

Scorpius, meanwhile, looked absolutely petrified as soon as he heard South Italy's voice, and backed up so fast he ran straight into his mother's legs.

"That's the Howler?" He whispered, catching Mrs. Malfoy's attention as she looked down at him sharply for using such a strange name. Her smile returned at once, and it wasn't phony or forced at all, merely apologetic.

"And your name, sir?"

South Italy couldn't resist.

"Lovino Vargas, belladonna Malfoy." He took her offered hand quite graciously, and didn't hesitate to kiss it. "And the pleasure is all mine."

"She's married." Feliciano hissed under his breath in Italian, completely forgetting the sandwich. "To our professor."

That didn't really stop South Italy, but as much as he enjoyed a good flirt he wasn't without morals and straightened up to continue the conversation like a semi-civil adult.

"Signore Kirkland and I work in the same field. My brother just told me your husband works as Professor at the English school. What do you do, donna?" Flattery and attention could get you pretty much anywhere, especially if you had a perfect complexion and a husky voice.
"I help manage things at Saint Mungo’s while my husband and son are at Hogwarts. Perhaps you've heard of our hospital?" The awkward pause that followed nearly killed the entire exchange because no, South Italy at least had no idea what Saint Mungo’s was. Somehow he managed to recover without needing Scotland to jump in.

"My apologies, Madame Malfoy, I work closest with the muggle side of the Italian Government. I'm not well versed in medicine."

"Saint Mungo’s does excellent work for the wizarding community across the British Isles, Mrs. Malfoy." So Scotland did intervene, tapping his watch with two fingers and getting everyone's attention. "And your labour is invaluable, but tea will have to wait until another time. Magic's restricted by our job code and if these two aren't passing through muggle security in less than an hour, they'll miss their flight down to Rome and then the real trouble will start."

"It can't be helped then. Perhaps we can arrange something when the boys go back to Hogwarts?" Scotland and South Italy shared a look, and neither one seemed to know how to answer.

"I... will probably still be in Rome, belladonna." Apparently the only thing stronger than Lovino Vargas' will to flirt was his distrust of magic. He still didn't seem quite comfortable standing on the enchanted platform.

"I'll make enough effort for the both of us then." Scotland filled in the social gap left by South Italy's excuses and nodded his head, the three of them making polite farewells as Scorpius waved excitedly to the two of them from his mother's side.

"See you at start of term then!" At least he was smiling, it made the good-bye much easier to say.

"Of course. Happy Christmas!"

"Happy new year!"

And then they were off.
The next twelve days were really fast, really hectic, and really, really fun.

From King's Cross station they stayed no more than ten minutes at England's town-house, Lovino yelling at him the whole time as he stripped off his child-sized clothes and finally removed the cross and chain where they'd rested for a solid four months. The nausea was so much worse than the last time he'd taken it off, and if he hadn't heard Scotland panicking in the other room as badly as Lovino did when he found himself shaking on the floor, he would have thought something was seriously wrong with the charm.

"Eat this- no, I said eat. Shit, you're shaking! What the hell kind of magic did you put on that thing?"

"I'm fine..."

"Okay, next semester you figure out a way to take it off every few weeks, understand? Just for an hour or two, Veneziano, I mean it."

They had to leave before he was really ready to stand up and walk around, but the taxi ride was manageable when he closed his eyes and leaned on his brother's shoulder. The airport was claustrophobic and filled with the stale air of travel, but the flight itself let him nap and wake up with nothing but the usual exhaustion and mild jet-lag of being on the go for eleven hours. They didn't go home after their flight either, but rather climbed into another taxi with Feliciano putting a tie on and trying to tug the wrinkles out of his jacket as a political aid handed him a file-folder and a small paper-cup of espresso to keep both of them on the go.

Feliciano had to run, actually run, to reach his government with Lovino so they could make it to the final sitting before the ministers and officials were dismissed for the holidays. After that it was a six hour meeting with the Prime Minister and President to discuss what had happened in his absence. Thankfully, there were no real surprises since Lovino had kept him informed, but there were lots of missing details and nuances to the things he was told.

"You'll both be in Turin tomorrow morning for the industry meeting, and after that you can enjoy the holiday."

"No, actually." Lovino corrected their bosses and Feliciano was just busy trying to take notes and stay awake. "We'll be on our way to Prague after that."

"The G8 nations will be meeting in Vienna on the nineteenth through to twenty-first." An emergency meeting, their bosses didn't have to come for but England and North Italy both did. "I haven't gone through half my e-mails yet, but I'm sure Germany will want to talk about things too."

Four months without seeing the other nations wasn't very long, it was being four months out of contact that made Christmas and New Years anything but relaxing times. Lovino, to his credit, really had handled the political side of things with only Feliciano’s letters and suggestions from the school to help him out, but it was obvious that he was just as exhausted by the role-reversal when he used that twelve days to stand constantly behind Feliciano and finally take a well-deserved break.

"There must be a way to contact you directly." Germany wasn't unreasonable, he was just saying exactly what Japan wanted while being more direct and to the point about it.

"You have to ask your wizarding departments for owls then, but I'm not sure how you'd get one to me all the way from Tokyo."
Christmas Eve was the first night Feliciano and Lovino actually spent alone, and he barely stayed up long enough to eat dinner before falling dead asleep on their couch. He didn’t even finish the half-drunk glass of wine in his hand, or deal with the paperwork which spilled onto the floor when he rolled over trying to get away from the numbers.

He woke up on Christmas morning in his own bed upstairs, excited but absolutely exhausted to the point where he didn’t question Lovino's voice behind him. His brother was sitting on top of the covers with more work in his lap and a red pen behind his ear, told him to go back to sleep, and even brushed a hand over Feliciano's hair until he gave up and slept the holiday away.

New Years was a lot more fun, because between visiting guests and a lot of wine there was dancing and fire-works all the way until midnight. None of them went to bed before the sun rose over Rome the next morning and 2018 officially began.

He almost forgot that he had to say goodbye to Lovino again in order to go back to Hogwarts, and that was what spoiled the entire twelve days in the end. They spent their last night at home drinking wine after a meal Feliciano himself made, sort of a last-hurrah in preparation for not being allowed near another kitchen again until coming home. They even discussed why they were doing this again before finally letting the silence settle over both of them.

Feliciano hated good-byes. He could think of a few things he hated more, but good-byes were the worst when he landed in London and took a taxi to England's town-house. A familiar eleven-year-old face answered the door with sullen green eyes, welcomed him inside, and helped fix the charm around his neck.

They were on the train that morning from King’s Cross station with Hogwarts looming in the distance.

Some adjustments were made to the charm before second term began at Hogwarts, not very dramatic, but just enough to keep suspicions down.

For one, they both grew three quarters of an inch.

For another, Arthur's watch was modified so that when it was quickly tapped three times with the point of his wand, the crystal face popped off and it sang a little tune.

As far as he knew no one except Higgs and a few of the other Slytherin boys had so much as noticed Italy's cross yet since he always kept it under his shirt, so there was no need to give it any extra tinkering beyond lengthening his limbs a little bit so they kept up with the rest of their classmates.

They weren’t on the train for ten minutes before Arthur suddenly hit on why, besides the charm, he felt so dreadful and found the same deathly look on Italy's shrunken face.

"Did you drink?" He croaked.

"So much... too much."

"Wine or coffee?"

"Both... too much both." Because they were two things wizards either just didn't have, like coffee, or were forbidden to students, like alcohol. So they both looked and felt miserable until the compartment door opened up and a relieved young face was there to make them both sit up and grin.
"There you two are!" It was actually nice to see Scorpius after the holidays, he wasn't cute: he was refreshing. "Kirkland, my mum saw your brother on the platform but you were long gone. You don't really hang around to say good-bye, do you?"

"As a rule we Kirklands are unfriendly by nature and unapproachable to all family members." Arthur rattled off with a certain sense of pride, which was enough to get Italy laughing a little with his cat sleeping in his lap while he stroked the animal for comfort.

"What about you, Vargas? I didn't see, uh, him, anywhere."

"My brother's still in Rome for work, I came with Kirkland again like in September."

"And I thought my dad worked a lot..." Scorpius seemed baffled by the idea that Italy had to come all the way from Rome on his own before getting on the train. "Say, I know it was just Christmas, but did either of you get all your homework done?"

"Homework?" They repeated the word in unison, and Scorpius just sat there looking at them like they'd both gone mad.

"There... The history of magic essay on the Goblin rebellion of 1704?"

Italy made a painful noise and slumped in his seat until his legs were bent out at the knees, cat bundled up in his arms and face in the oblivious animal’s fur.

"And for Potions, we had to make the laughing draught."

"Well I guess my mark's shot for term." Arthur lamented, slapping himself in the face. An essay could be managed but there was no way he could brew a potion with his kit and materials locked up in his trunk under their feet.

"And then there was Transfiguration." Scorpius put on a scared look and stared straight at Italy, trying to smile through his nerves without getting very far. "I was actually hoping you could help me with that, Vargas. I've got a big box of matches with me and Transfiguration's your best subject, so..."

"Sure, I can do that. But do you have any parchment? Can we hand something in written in muggle ink?" He still had a pen in his bag from whichever conference he'd been to without Arthur during their time off, and he drafted a few lines of the half-foot essay with Scorpius frowning and telling him no, the Goblin Keep had been in Plymouth, not Portsmouth.

Arthur hurried his own essay up and promised to make up for stealing all Scorpius' paper when they got to school, the three of them sinking to the floor of the compartment so they could sit cross-legged and pull out their wands with a box of matches dumped on the carpet between them. Turning matches into bobby pins, a small but essential skill.

"Oh, hang on." Italy padded his sleeve where he was still wearing a blue jumper and black jeans instead of his house robes and grey school uniform. Obviously his wand wasn't there, so as the witch with the snack trolley came by and Scorpius and Arthur shelled out the money for study sweets, Italy went through his bag for his wand.

And then he stopped and went through it again.

"Mio dio-"

And then he dumped the whole thing out over the matches, highlighters and a calculator coming out
along with discarded notes from an energy presentation China had given just before New Years. Of all the useless things to bring along, his dead cell-phone was sitting on top of the pile, and while Scorpius seemed baffled by the contents, Feliciano Vargas looked like he was about to be sick.

"No." He hadn't-

"Vargas you didn't."

"I forgot my -"

"How do you just forget your wand!?" It was the first time Arthur had ever seen Scorpius yell at someone, and Italy deserved every shrill word of it. "Are you completely daft? How did you even get here from Italy without it!? A wizard without his wand, a pure-blood without his-!"

"Will you quiet down?" But as much as Vargas deserved it Arthur rose up to stop Scorpius from shouting quite so loudly, because if the entire train heard him then every student in the great hall would know before dinner time. "Do you have any idea how much the other houses would love to hear you right now? Clam up and let’s just finish the assignment."

"But Kirkland, he-"

"Yes, and he's a fool, but I for one am not willing to lose points over the matter. Just pray he can get the fastest bird in the owlery, and that Longbottom's just got pruning and wandless work for us tomorrow!"

"Owls take two days to reach Rome-" Italy moaned the words behind his hands where he was sitting in a piteous heap on the compartment floor, his face completely covered to hide his shame while Arthur and Scorpius looked at each other directly where they were standing.

"Now can I?"

"Yes, yes you can and I shan't get in the way." Arthur sat down again like the gentleman he was and swiped a chocolate frog off the pile of treats he was no longer willing to share.

"You bell-end!"

Italy did cry a little bit, and he was banished from the chess-board on the logical grounds that he couldn't draw his wand to figure out which side of the board to take. He also wasn't allowed to play exploding snap without a wand, and by the time they changed into their robes Arthur had turned his hair three different colours because the idiot had no way to counter him, and he'd successfully passed the skill on to Scorpius.

"Enough! Stop it! That's enough you big bullies leave me alone!"

By the time they reached the school and the Great Hall, Arthur's intentions of not letting the rest of the first years know had fallen flat. All of Slytherin table found out and although most students didn't particularly care, enough of them got on Vargas' case that Head Girl Pucey came down hard on the table as a whole to make them shut up. Her reaction, of course, caused the Ravenclaws to pay attention, and it all spiralled out of control from there.

Even with McGonagall's opening speech and a few announcements about the new term, the Slytherin first years were required to walk in a ring around Vargas to keep any stray curses or jinxes from finding their way to him as they hurried at a half-run to reach the safety of the dungeons. Professor Malfoy was already seething in the common room when they arrived.
"I'm not going to ask why or even how, Vargas, I just expect that you already have a letter written to correct this?" Scorpius's father, they all agreed, was absolutely terrifying when angered and didn't even have to raise his voice to make Arthur deeply regret the shock of purple hair still sticking out the back of Italy's head.

"Yes sir, it's right here, sir." And Italy produced the letter between his sniffles and hurt feelings, the words written inside honestly begging South Italy to wrap up the wand and send it as fast as humanly possible to the school.

"I will be attaching my own letter making it clear that any excessive displays of discipline, in howler-form or otherwise, will not be tolerated, understood?"

"Completely sir, and I apologize again, sir."

"Very well. Now, Mister Kirkland, you have exactly ten seconds to remove that affront to this house from Vargas's head, starting now: seven, six..." That wasn't ten seconds at all!

Half an hour later after cleaning up and dressing down, Arthur found Italy face-down in his bed with the blankets piled up over him completely and Gino, the foolish thing, purring happily on the small of its master's back.

"Vargas."

"I don't wanna go to class tomorrow I really don't." He sounded like a proper child, not a single hair showing from under the heavy winter blankets as his pillow muffled his voice.

"We can partner up and you can borrow my wand in Charms, you know."

"It's going to be a disaster we both know your wand won't obey me."

"You could use Scorpius'?"

"He thinks I'm the scum of the earth."

"No, I don't."

Arthur was surprised when he looked up and saw Scorpius leaning on the other side of Italy's bed, one thin hand petting the familiar where the cat was too docile and somewhat wise to mistake the boy for a danger or a threat.

"I think you're foolish and completely absent minded, but that's about it, Vargas."

"I'm missing the auto show for this my life sucks."

"The what?" Scorpius looked at Arthur for an explanation, and he just shrugged and gave the honest answer.

"Muggle business. Loud machine things, quite fun if you've got the mind for them." The child looked revolted and Arthur just smiled and poked the blankets with his wand a few times, getting a squirm out of the nation hiding beneath them.

"Fine then, get some sleep and we'll worry about it in the morning."

And they did worry about it. In fact they worried, fretted, agonized, and made great efforts to stay out of trouble because of it, which wasn't easy considering Italy might as well have stapled a target to
his back. They literally ran from class to class, Scorpius and Arthur dragging him to keep up, because when a Ravenclaw boy hexed Feliciano's History of Magic textbook to grow teeth and snap at him he had no way of calming the beast down and turning it back into a book, and wandless Binns was useless at doing anything more than taking points from Slytherin for disrupting his lecture.

He was safe enough in Herbology until a stream of water from a wand-tip killed his fireweed plant before he could get Scorpius or Gamp to hurry over and perform a spell to save it. Thankfully Professor Longbottom was more attentive than Binns, and although he didn't see who did it, he heard the snickering behind the Gryffindor pots and slammed his own house with a ten-point demerit: it was as good as losing fifty from any other teacher.

Blessedly, he was able to help himself in their Flying lesson on the fourth day of waiting for South Italy to please please please send a package back to the school. Yes, one of the Gryffindors cast an enchantment on Feliciano's broom to make it buck and roll wildly in the snowfall, but he didn't need Desford's help when centuries of riding horses made a bucking broom something he knew how to wrestle to the ground and dismantle with a small knife he'd started wearing at his belt to ward off curses. He wound up serving detention to string the broom's bristled back end together again, but he didn't lose any points and Desford didn't mother-hen him into oblivion.

After a week of nonsense, Arthur had never seen Albus Potter look so furious before. He was the splitting image of his father and just as courageous, maybe moreso, than the famous Auror.

Because it took nerves of steel forged in hellfire to stand up in the middle of the great hall one afternoon, march past Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables, be stared down by every member of Slytherin house, and find the brow-beaten young wizard with his head buried in his arms holding a letter from Paris saying his wand couldn't be found until the end of the week because South Italy was in France for a business deal.

But that was exactly what Albus Potter did, a few of his family members standing up and horrified watching him enter a den of snakes, before he offered a hand to Italy.

"Stay... Stay behind after Potions class today, Vargas. I-" And he quickly looked back over his shoulder at his housemates. He saw something Arthur didn't in the faces watching him from across the hall, and frankly the Nation didn't know if he trusted the child all that much. "I don't want to cause an even bigger scene right now. I just- I'm getting sick of watching this."

"I'm getting sick of going through it."

A handshake and a cyrptic message and that was all Potter had time for before he hurried back to his table and sat down at the very end of it. The Gryffindors were in a tiff and honestly no one at Slytherin table knew what to think either.

Before Arthur himself could think of something, Scorpius had already made up his mind.

"I don't care if he's the son of the Wizarding World's greatest hero, if he tries any funny business after class today, Vargas, I'll break his fingers I swear it."

They didn't leave him alone for a minute on the way to class, thankful that wands weren't necessary for potion brewing and Professor Slughorn was so far along in years that he barely heard any of the gossip or trouble going around the school anymore. Arthur doubted the old professor was even aware that five of his favourite students lingered in the classroom after everyone else was dismissed, because Slughorn ambled out and off to his office after chatting with them for ten minutes about slug clubs and growing up to great destinies and all that nonsense, leaving without looking back.
Potter wasn't stupid enough to wait alone, his cousin Rose was standing next to him and another Gryffindor Arthur didn't know was flanking him the same way Scorpius and Arthur himself were backing up Italy. If any of the Gryffindors attacked, they'd find themselves out-matched and Arthur wouldn't mind explaining it all in *precise detail* to Headmistress McGonagall if necessary.

When he noticed Potter shaking a little bit like his nerves were showing up after his ballsy display in the Great Hall, Rose Weasley closed her eyes and let out an exasperated breath through her nose, sighing "this is stupid" under her breath and causing a sting in her cousin.

"No, it's not." He answered sharply, staring straight at Italy before he swung a hand back to his wand.

"Think very carefully about your next move, Potter."

"Honestly, Albus, I expected more honor from Gryffindor." Italy's voice dropped low in a way it usually didn't, and Arthur felt his ears perk up at the sound of it. It... usually didn't mean anything good when the nation of smiles and sunshine started taking issues *this* seriously.

"I wasn't going to cast anything, I-!"

"A likely story, Potter. Drop your hand and I'll lower my wand."

"No! Just watch me." Arthur would have pulled back to let off a spell but Albus stomped his feet on the stone floor and turned so they could see where his wand-case was attached to his belt, not slung up his sleeve like normal. He used both hands and his actions were difficult to make out until all of the sudden he wasn't just holding the wand, but the entire case in both hands as he turned around properly again and shoved it out in Italy's direction.

"I'm sick of it!" He shouted, "I'm absolutely sick and tired of watching it! It was funny for a day or two watching you scurry around like you were scared of your own shadow, but that broom could have knocked your teeth out- or worse, and if Longbottom had thought you'd killed the fireweed yourself he would have failed you out of the semester!"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you give your own wand away, Albus!" Rose Weasley had a low, angry voice sometimes that wasn't as threatening as the tone Italy had used a minute earlier. Arthur lowered his wand without putting it away, but while he watched the Gryffindors turn and start to bicker, Scorpius was staring at Italy.

"Is that really his wand?"

"It is, but I can’t use it."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"A wand is all a wizard really has!" Rose yelled, "Without that you might as well just pack up and leave Hogwarts behind!"

"If all it takes is someone misplacing their wand to turn them into trash, then let’s see how much Gryffindor laughs when I’m in the same boat as him!" That was... an astonishingly brave thing for the Potter boy to claim. "He can hold onto it until his actual wand gets here, and when he gets his wand back I’ll get mine. I know he can’t use it: the wand chooses the wizard and all that, but
"Is that what you think I should do instead, Weasley?" Italy never, ever jumped into an open conflict, but he didn't squeal or cower away from this one as he barged right through Potter’s argument. "Go get my trunk and leave the school because I'm nothing without a bit of wood and hair? For such a smart witch you're a very petty child." Rose looked absolutely disgusted to hear those words come out of his mouth.

"How dare you, Slytherin."

"How dare you, Gryffindor." The charm could only do so much to hide his age, because an adult scolding a child would always sound like an adult scolding a child. "A wand is not all a wizard has; a wizard also has his integrity, his pride, his honour, and his friends, and if you can't understand that then Gryffindor house needs to revaluate what it stands for, because this is the very first time I've seen anyone in red robes come close to those expectations."

Children weren't supposed to speak like that, they could understand those virtues but being able to put them into words so readily wasn't a skill Feliciano Vargas should have had, but the person beneath the charm certainly did. And he also had the dignity to look back at Albus Potter and offer the wand back to him.

"Thank you for the gesture, Potter, but I would rather see you use this wand to defend people like me, not throw it away to pity us." Albus looked speechless, but his friend standing next to him quickly elbowed him to take the wand back where Italy was holding it carefully in both hands. As soon as it was passed back to its wielder, Italy quickly addressed everyone again. "We're leaving, don't follow us. Let's go."

Italy swept out of the room first and Arthur and Scorpius quickly turned to follow him, Arthur lingering just long enough to meet Rose Weasley firmly in the eye before nodding to Potter to show he agreed with what had been said. The Gryffindors didn't say anything or try to stop them from leaving, and the Slytherins didn't say anything until they were several long corridors away and standing outside the alcove with their house mascot writhing on the wall getting ready to let them in.

Scorpius broke the silence first, and he sounded almost in awe.

"That... that wasn't foolish at all, Vargas. I mean- wow. You really told her off!"

"It's nothing to be proud of, Scorpius." Italy answered quietly, his voice still serious and his eyes focused on the black void opening up in front of them as the walls parted. It was obvious he just wanted to get into the dormitory and put this entire day behind them.

“IT’s not? I mean, you really could have one-upped Potter by taking his wand away you know.”

"I could have.” Italy agreed, taking the lead when the portal opened up just enough to let them through into the safety of the Slytherin commons. “But I just don't like being pitied."
When the blessed day in late January arrived when Feliciano received his wand back, he knew he didn't act the way everyone else in Slytherin expected him to.

The confused looking owl who usually delivered his mail wasn't Italian in origin, the trip was too long so the animals switched off at different owl posts across Europe, handing off their parcels and taking a rest. But the shy grey animal with its crooked neck and soft feathers brought the wand and delivered it safely into his hand, along with the expected parcel of Roman paperwork, but no Howler.

Apparently Professor Malfoy had a way with words that even Lovino didn't want to mess with, not that that'd stopped him from writing a normal letter anyways.

'MORON' was one word that took an entire sheet of paper, the thick black marks jagged trying to convey the depth of emotion Lovino wasn't allowed to shriek at him this month. The next sheet was plenty abusive, but the succeeding ones were much nicer and almost sounded sorry that he'd had to go through so much trouble without the wand (while still maintaining that he was an idiot and it was his own fault blah blah blah).

But because there was no howler, no one else in the Great Hall seemed to notice it was there. And because Feliciano didn't get up and jump around with excitement, when any of the older students noticed, he put his finger up over his lips as a signal for Slytherin house to remain quiet.

"What are you planning?"

"Vargas?"

England and Scorpius were suspicious, but they also got up and followed him when Feliciano signalled for them to come with him across the Great Hall to the Gryffindor table. Breakfast was wrapping up and students were drifting off to their first classes, but the first years in their two houses had study period now that the weather was deemed too foul for flying in the morning. Potter was easy to spot with a potions essay out in front of him and Rose Weasley playing with her wand trying to set a self-polishing charm over a set of teaspoons.

Feliciano signalled for his friends to be quiet and quickly stepped right up to the table.

"Potter."

"Why's a Slytherin asking?" Albus looked up from his homework, but he wasn't the one who answered. That privilege went to an older boy with black hair and a self-assured slant where he was leaning on one arm over the table.

"I meant Albus." Feliciano corrected.

"But you said Potter, and that means me too." Ah, so this was the older Potter boy.

"James." Albus groaned, rolling up his parchment and standing up where he was on the same side of the table as the Slytherins. Albus Potter's nervous little fidgets were all back, but even though he had to swallow hard to clear the way for his words, he did speak. "Sorry, Vargas. What is it?"
"I just wanted to know if you remember what I told you in the Potions room a few days ago." The boy looked like he wanted to crawl under a big rock and not come out again, but he nodded.

"Yes, Vargas. Every word of it, I think." Whether to Albus' credit or something else, Feliciano had actually lived an incident-free week when it came to his lessons with Gryffindors. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were another matter, but it was nice having at least an hour or two not trapped in the Slytherin commons where he didn't have to watch his back the entire time.

"Then I want you to know that if you ever need my help at this school, you have it." And Feliciano offered his hand with a smile, a little tired of trying to make friends with children who wanted nothing to do with green robes, but Albus seemed more surprised than affronted, so maybe he just wasn't as prejudiced as his cousin.

"I, I..."

Or his brother.

"Hey, Wandless!"

Feliciano didn't look, he just felt his eyes fall a little and a sigh get half-way out of him before James Potter let a spell off his wand. The hand he'd offered up was flung to the side and pushed Scorpius back, the other locked around Arthur's wand-wrist and pulling him away too. He'd rather take the curse with both hands full than get Slytherin into anymore trouble.

But Feliciano didn't take the curse, Albus did.

Because Albus Potter closed his eyes, wound his shoulders up tight, and stepped straight into the line of fire between Feliciano and his brother's wand to take the gout of off-yellow light straight in the back. The blow made him stumble a little bit but didn't seem very painful. Feliciano was too shocked and impressed to say anything before the curse took effect.

"Albus?" Potter went very pale, opened his horrified green eyes up again, dropped his jaw, and vomited a massive, slimy green slug onto the Great Hall floor.

The Republic of Italy made a sound of utter revolt as his stomach backflipped, screamed "English children are monster!", and fled the scene at once.

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Albus Potter was worth more respect than he seemed to get. Even Scorpius, who had his own myriad of reasons to distrust the name, had to admit that the younger Potter brother wasn't all that bad.

As January and February marched steadily by the weather repeatedly thought of improving before dumping another cold rain on their heads or suddenly freezing in the dead of night. It made having a common room under the lake both good and bad because, despite being absolutely air-tight, the dorms were still made of stone. No matter how deep as the lake was this late through winter it was absolutely frigid all the way to their windows, and probably further down since the dorm actually rested on a sunken cliff, not the actual lake-bed.

So yes, it was cold in the Slytherin common room. And it was absolutely freezing in the first year dormitory.

"Well, did any of you think of activating the heating charms?" The what-now? "Honestly."
Bless Zabini for having the patience to deal with first years. He showed them how damned easy it was to perform a simple wand-flick at the room door, lighting up the eyes of the brass snake mounted on the stone slab. The effect was subtle, but it made the four boys feel like absolute idiots for not noticing that any of the other door six doors had been glowing like that for weeks. At least it meant they got a decent night's sleep again as February melted into March.

"Slytherin tradition really, see how long it takes the first years to figure out the charm." Higgs' older brother was in sixth year and explained it to them once Zabini decided he'd had enough of their ineptitude and left the commons to study for his NEWT exams. "My year has the best story I think, we broke the charm on the Girls dormitory and stole all their bedding. Caused an absolute massacre that night, Angela-"

Thomas Higgs lost his voice in the middle of his sentence, saying a name Arthur didn't know until he remembered all at once why that was. He looked at Italy and saw the other nation wearing a tragic expression, fully aware of the way Italy never forgot or even let the reality of their mission slip from his mind. Without prompting from any of the first years, the older student picked his story back up with a brave smile.

"Angi was a true monster, she came blazing right into the boys dorms yelling in all this angry Italian and firing curses off her wand." He said, gesturing carefully with his hands to show spell-work and hexes. “Turned my entire wardrobe pink, she did! I was a laughing-stock for weeks until mum sent me new work robes. In the end her brother was the one to show us the heating charm because he had to physically drag her out here until she calmed down.”

"Was she always scary like that?" Italy asked, his voice either feint by design or because the subject hurt him to talk about. Higgs' brother just shook his head.

"Naw, cute as a button that one most of the time, unless you made her mad. Charlie tells me that girl Gamp in your year's a bit of a crier but Angela woulda set her straight and probably hidden her under her robe. Worse temper than Pucey, though. None of us really… saw it coming."

Gathering up bits and pieces like that about the Rosetti children ripped Arthur and Italy out of the illusion of being Hogwarts Students better than any work package could have. The charm was such a constant thing that after a month or two it was hard to notice anymore, and their unfamiliarity with Hogwarts before arriving as children made the scale seem almost natural. The professors were as unapproachable as wizards often were to muggles, figures of authority not unlike military personnel or government bureaucrats with set jobs and specific protocols to follow.

But remembering why they'd come was what reminded them that they weren't here to get along and make friends and pass exams. Italy had a small book he kept in the breast pocket of his robes, occasionally scribbling words in it whenever Arthur saw him speaking to older Slytherins about one thing or another. He even picked up a tidbit of some sort from Professor Malfoy, because when Arthur joined him and Scorpius in the hospital wing one afternoon to fetch a warming potion for Gamp's sneezing, Italy was sitting on a tall stool with his ankles crossed, book in his lap and a small quill spinning between his fingers getting notes down in short-hand Italian.

He never let Arthur read what was written, but it was obvious he was still taking his inquiry seriously.

March passing slowly into April was what prompted Arthur to try and broach an important subject with Italy: just how long were they going to keep this up for?

You'd think it would be easy to have a private conversation at Hogwarts school.
You’d be very wrong.

For one, there was Scorpius to consider. It was rude and a little bit frightening to turn around and see how both of your friends had gone off and abandoned you for a chat. It was also dangerous for Slytherins to be caught alone in the halls or out on the grounds. They couldn’t just leave him somewhere and go off for a bit of gossip.

There was also their age and the damned cap on their energy levels: staying up all night was positively out of the question. Exams were looming and the sixth and seventh years were perfectly capable of staying up all night and going off to classes the next day without a wink of sleep, so the common room was never empty. Higgs was also an impossibly light sleeper so trying to discuss something in their dorm room was like trying to shuffle cards without letting them rustle against each other.

Passing notes was dangerous because for one, it would be committing the secret to writing. Vanishing ink also didn't help: they tried it one afternoon in the library when Scorpius was serving detention for ‘accidentally’ hitting one of their Ravenclaw classmates with the stunning spell they’d learned, not the sleepy old gremlins the professor had brought in for them to practice on.

They got to the first "why?" before the ink proved an inconvenience, one because it was a lot of writing for Italy to get his thoughts down, and two because the damned ink started vanishing before he’d gotten half-way through. With Gamp sitting next to them they hadn't had much choice but to just give up and finish doing government work under their completed History essays.

'But what about the toilets' you say? Yes, what a fine idea. You try having a jolly old chin-wag in the lou when you already know from experience that the bathroom in the dungeons is not for lingering in, and the other five or six they had access too were either in high-traffic areas of the school or patrolled by at least one unfriendly ghost who wouldn't hesitate to question why two Slytherin boys had an awful lot to say to each other.

Arthur very nearly crawled into Italy's bed one night to just hiss in his damned ear, but Higgs rolled over as soon as the lights on Italy's bed flared up at Arthur's very awake touch, so it was a loss.

How the Golden Trio ever got anything done in their time at Hogwarts was a mystery to Arthur Kirkland, because as a Slytherin first year he hadn't noticed before how damned impossible it was to sneak off with a friend and have a serious talk absolutely free from discovery.

By the end of April they’d settled for just chewing angrily at each other over the table at meal-times, their latest attempt at trying to morse-code the conversation having resulted in Italy’s fingers being glued together in Charms class when one of their Hufflepuff classmates made a big fuss and Flitwick agreed that one more tap would earn him a punishment. He might as well have been wearing a mitten on his left hand.

"What's the matter with you two?"

Arthur thought screw it and just asked the damned question over Scorpius' curious head.

"Do you want to stay or not?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not satisfied yet."
"How much more is it going to take?"

"The story doesn't make sense. I'm not leaving until it does."

"Fine."

"Fine."

They were going to need a proper sit-down over the summer then.

"...You two are bloody mad. Pass the sausage, Vargas."

Exams came up quickly, which was as much a surprise as a relief because it felt like the second half the year sped by without nearly as much drama as the first. If either Arthur or Italy had scored anything less than Outstanding then they would have been obligated to snap their wands and perhaps even resign from their governments. So instead of fretting about their own marks, save Italy in History of Magic, they made it their goal to make sure the rest of the first years passed all of their courses.

"I don't remember anything about the Goblin Rebellion of 1404."

"That's because there wasn't one you idiot." Their plan meant dragging the other first years out of the commons to hide in one of the deeper corridors of the library, a round table and a few noise-suppressing charms to keep the studious chatter from getting them found-out providing an excellent environment for revision and note-taking. Not everyone came, of course, Higgs couldn't be bothered and one of the girls simply refused to leave the dormitory after getting in a terrible screeching match with one of Rose Weasley's friend earlier that week. Arthur looked up from his copy of the quarterly stock-market reports hidden under his astronomy text and backed up Scorpius' criticism of Italy's awful grasp of English magical history.

"Feliciano Vargas," he scolded, "If you fail History of Magic I'll expect to see you outside Ollivander's in September to buy a new wand after breaking your current one in a dozen pieces."

Italy just sniffed at him.

"First of all: I would never buy an English wand. Second, I would never break this one: you confuse me with my brother." It was almost like he heard the words half a second after everyone else did, because Italy closed his eyes for a moment to show he understood how stupid that comment had been when they were sitting at a table full of magical children.

"What?"

"You're not serious, are you, Vargas?"

"Broke his wand? Was it an accident? Did someone attack him?"

"That's the one who sends the Howlers all the time? How's he do it without a wand?"

"It-" Italy had no right to look at Arthur as if he was somehow going to help get him out of this mess. Arthur just pulled his textbook down a little further and made a point of circling something interesting on the chart with the nub of his quill. "It was a long time ago, everything's fine now."

"Is that why you knew how to handle things when your wand was missing?" Gamp asked, looking horrified at the idea of her own wand being snapped where she'd picked the holly rod off the table where it had been resting after her charm's practice. "Kirkland jinxed that little knife from
Hogsmeade for you, but you gave him the instructions on how to, right?"

"Pardon me, Eliza, it was my own spell thank you."

"From the Standard Book of Spells." She shot back, unusually talkative for once as she put on a cocky little grin and stuck her tongue out at him before looking back at where everyone else was sticking Vargas with yet more questions.

"My brother works with muggles every day, and most don't know about wizards or magic or anything." Being vague wasn't going to work on their house-mates, so while everyone else's eyes started going wider and wider, Italy just spelled it out for the lot of them. "Our house is all muggle items with muggle rules and no spells or enchantments on anything. I can remember the last time I saw my brother use his wand, but it was a long, long time ago."

More like two decades ago, and whenever South Italy had last touched his wand had probably been right before he'd done exactly what Arthur had only meant as a joke this time: he'd snapped it and sworn never to let that kind of dark magic affect his people again. If Arthur wanted to be honest with himself, he'd admit that he'd placed such a heavy set of enchantments over his own wand hoping to accomplish much the same thing. Where South Italy and England differed was the positive relationship Arthur still tried to maintain with his wizarding population. The status of magic in Italy wasn't something he was privilege to.

"That sounds dreadful." Scorpius complained, still paying attention to Italy and pulling an awful face of sympathy and disgust. It was like he'd just been told his friend ate out of dumpsters and slept in a mouldy cardboard box in the park. "You should try coming to my house this summer. Malfoy Manor's huge!"

"I'll ask him about it."

"Is it true you've been in a muggle flying machine before, Vargas?" One of the other Slytherin girls sitting next to Gamp asked.

"Ah..."

"Scorpius was telling us once that that's how you get to London every time from Rome."

Italy fidgeted nervously for a few seconds, but then he put on a bashful little smile that made him seem much cuter than he really was, his head tilted to the side as he gave an exaggerated shrug.

"Like I said, my brother and I live without magic most of the time. Airplanes aren't that bad once you get used to them."

The table didn't erupt with chatter, it was more like the noise and excitement welled up slowly but with enough force behind it to let Arthur know not to bother getting in its way. It was rather like watching sea-water rise into a cave and wash through the tidal pools. You could kick up all the fuss you wanted, but it wasn't going to make the slightest bit of difference in the end.

"You don't happen to have a copy of the Laughing Draught recipe over there, do you, Vargas?" He asked instead, talking around the curious whispering and the dumbstruck stares. Instead of being revolted, even Scorpius seemed mystified and maybe even curious through his horror. What a strange thing indeed, wizards willingly going about like muggles. Why, thirty years ago that would have branded the entire Vargas family Blood-traitors, wouldn't it?

Vargas and Kirkland, to be more precise.
"Another year has gone by, leaving today with everything to be remembered." The end of term feast arrived with great sighs of relief from the students and several ever-changing itineraries for Arthur and Italy from their contacts beyond the wizarding world. It seemed the UN couldn’t make up its mind about when and where they wanted to come together for the next meeting, and in the meantime the G10 were in a pickle after a sour election had Canada standing without a proper government.

The Great Hall was filled with silent students as Headmistress McGonagall gave her speech, Arthur expecting at any moment to hear about her long-awaited resignation, but it never came.

"In fourth place this year, with three hundred and ninety-seven points: Slytherin house!" Their own table clapped the most for that announcement, only one or two of the politest Ravenclaws or Hufflepuff’s joining in for the short thunder of appreciation for coming in fourth, otherwise known as last. The winning house was already quite obvious: all one had to do was look up at the banners decorating the hall to find the answer.

"In third place, with four hundred and twenty-nine points: Hufflepuff house!" At least a difference of only some thirty points made the sting a little easier to bear. Arthur wouldn’t lie and say Slytherin applauded the other house very hard, or that they kept on nearly as long as the supportive hoots and hollers from their great hall neighbours.

"Second place, Gryffindor house with four hundred and eighty-six points!" The entire school shook, thunder and pounding stomps with outrageous glee making the hovering candles tremble in the air. Arthur could smile a little this time, because at least the most obnoxious house in the school hadn’t won, and in a way it was still nice to listen to them cheer and be pleased with their own performance.

"And this year's House champion, with an outstanding five hundred and five points: Ravenclaw!"

Ravenclaw table was an explosion of noise in the middle of the hall, hats flying straight up in the air. Hufflepuffs were beating the table with their forks and knives, Gryffindors were bellowing at the top of their lungs, and because Ravenclaw was not Gryffindor, Head Girl Pucey was beating her hands together with a look on her face that said if the rest of the house didn't match her, they'd have their tongues turned inside out before dinner was served.

There were no hard feelings about being dusted with blue confetti and having special cakes with bronze and blue icing. The usual fare of roasted lamb and mashed potatoes, summer fruits and steamed vegetables filled plates as all the ruckus about summer and holidays kept the great hall buzzing for everyone's final night at Hogwarts. Even Arthur and Italy were able to set aside the issue of next year and the inquiry to enjoy themselves, cheers with chilled pumpkin juice telling each other "Next year! Next year we'll get it for sure!"

For Slytherin, the celebration didn't last quite as long. There was less to pride themselves over and their table began to empty first, the same familiar clusters and cliques melting away one after the other, the first years taking point and looking up when Zabini started calling names and gestured for them to follow him. For safety's sake, they moved as one group through the halls and down into the dungeons.

"Professor Malfoy." They expected sleep to be the only thing left for them when they got there, but Scorpius' bemused father was once again standing in the middle of the commons. He had been talking to one of the graduating students, congratulating them by the looks of things, but he turned around as soon as the first years and their Prefect arrived, and he seemed rather surprised as his eyes
combed over the lot and settled on the student on Arthur's left.

"Mister Vargas," he called Italy's name easily enough, a good sign that Arthur could relax because the idiot wasn't in trouble. "Professor McGonagall asked me to fetch you. She assures me you aren't in any trouble, but you're still to come at once."

"Oh? Well, okay." Okay he said and Arthur nearly slapped a hand over his own face. How the moron could stand there and act like he didn't know exactly what the summons was about either meant he was becoming an excellent actor, or he really was dumb as bucket of moon-wart. Arthur wasn't privileged to go along and hear whatever Professor Malfoy had to say to Italy along the way to the Headmistress' office, and to be honest his tiny body was too exhausted to stay awake long enough for him to come back. The only thing he did have the energy for, barely, was Scorpius.  

"Please- please- one week, just one week please you've got to-"

"Scorpius."

"Oh, come on!" This ruse was going to be the death of him, because Scorpius Malfoy had a pouting, pleading look about him that put Sealand to shame. "Three days. You have to come visit my family for at least three days over summer holidays, you have to."

"And if I don't?" He challenged, only to have his hopes fall when Scorpius screwed himself up to his full height and stuck his chin in the air like a proper Pure-blood princeling.  

"Then I shan't speak to you again." Arthur had to think long and hard about that threat for a good ten seconds, half-changed into his pajamas and rumpling his school clothes up in a ball to toss in his trunk for tomorrow morning.  

"Will you be taking that other one with you then?" He snarked back, and watched Scorpius's argument collapse on itself.  

"You can't be serious! You're going to be busy for two whole months?"

"I keep telling you, Scorpius, I don't know what my brother's planning."

"You can't even promise to try?"

"Did you even bother to ask your mum this time before inviting me?"

"Yes." And oh, how smug he looked when he said it too. This was impossible. "My dad too and he says it'd be an excellent way to spend the summer. Will you at least ask?"

Arthur surrendered.

"Fine. I'll ask, and I'll fight for it too since I know that's what you're really asking." Watching him brighten back up all at once was more rewarding than Arthur was ever going to dare admit, even in his own stubborn heart.  

"Three weeks?" He preened.  

"One."

"Two and I'll leave you alone all day about it tomorrow." For Christ's sake...  

"Deal." As long as Italy didn't find out how Arthur'd been worn down by a twelve-year-old boy he
could still hold his head up on the train the next morning. He fell asleep hard with a stomach full of good food and the sweet buzz of the party lingering up high over the Slytherin dorms in the Great Hall.

For all its darkness, he couldn't say he regretted this first year of Hogwarts at all.

Minerva McGonagall was a wise woman, she knew what was going on at her school, and she hadn't made a fuss about Feliciano's identity when he'd spoken with her on his last night in the school. In fact, as soon as Professor Malfoy had left the two of them alone, the headmistress had produced an adult-sized set of clothes and enchanted a changing screen to hurry over and give him a bit of privacy. She'd pardoned herself for preferring to speak to him as an adult, and Feliciano had forgiven her the terrible nausea of removing the enchantment only to put it back on an hour later after their discussion was finished.

"I guess it's easier to take an adult's face seriously?" He'd asked, a little disoriented and wearing borrowed clothes, and had taken a seat across from the Headmistress's wide desk.

"I do my best to pay all of my students the respect they deserve, Mister Vargas." He had a sense that Minerva McGonagall was not meant to be a frail or breathless witch, but her majesty was shaken after a very long night and she seemed more exhausted than at ease while speaking to him. "Where threats and challenges to this school are concerned, however, I prefer to face those head-on."

And they had talked. They'd both agreed that it was too early for Feliciano to give a concise report, especially with the dizzying effect of the charm still swimming around his head, but instead of promising to deliver his inquiry to her sometime over the summer, Feliciano delayed it.

"Next year, maybe."

"Next year, Mister Vargas?" Oh, and when her voice trembled so subtly that he almost missed it, he knew what kind of weight he was bringing down on her. "Your inquiry is not finished?"

"Not yet, Madame."

"An entire year spent masquerading as a student and still you aren't satisfied?" She spoke harshly and Feliciano pulled on his sense of sympathy and tact to ease her fraying nerves.

"Headmistress, I understand that this operation caused you to remain at Hogwarts when you'd hoped to leave the school and retire. Please, it is clear even to a stranger like myself that you are exhausted, do not let my presence force you to continue working. The issue is much larger than a single witch or wizard."

His words didn't end up having the effect he'd hoped for.

"Mister Vargas, with all due respect, sir," not that there seemed to be much respect, especially when her tongue gave a sharp Scottish trill to the last word. "When you purposefully enter my school with intentions to dismantle our hard-won reputation as a safe haven and provider of outstanding education, that is not something I can be expected to turn my back on and simply walk away from. If yourself and Mister Kirkland are committed to spending another year at Hogwarts carrying on with this charade, then so be it. Hogwarts will prove itself in the end and I will be here to see these trials through to what will be a most satisfying conclusion."
She'd spoken to him with the kind of confidence that, much like the year before when he'd arrived in the wake of horrifying news, Feliciano found himself acknowledging a grudging respect for the sorceress. Whatever kind of soul was hiding inside such an old, stubborn vessel wasn't the tiniest bit afraid to face down a foreign nation. Once their discussion had ended, Feliciano had been dismissed to go back behind the screen and transform back into his disguise, then leave and make his way back down to the dungeon for a restless night of nearly-no sleep.

Apparently if they removed the charm for a little while it brought their endurance back up to adult levels. It meant sleeping at ten o'clock after an easy day was just too early for a decent night's rest.

Waking up on the day they were set to go back was like a relief, and hundreds of Hogwarts students flooded the Hogsmeade train station trying to get on the express without losing pets, friends, or their sanity. England had told him months ago that the class of first years was unusually small, but it seemed like a necessary thing considering there was almost no chance at all of finding a compartment to themselves this time.

Prefect Zabini opened his compartment door to seven lost first years and performed his very last kind act of protection for the year, shuffling Sixth Year Thomas Higgs out with an exasperated look and no small bit of complaining. There wasn't close to enough seating for seven when Feliciano chose to sit on the floor instead of up on the seat. Charles Higgs loudly claimed a spot by the window his brother had just vacated, and everyone else piled in on top of each other. They were barely settled before the Prefect turned around in the doorway with a warning.

"Now listen here, you lot." He put on a stern face, but the rest of them weren't too sure how serious he really was. When he started speaking, it cleared things up right away: they'd better pay attention. "Starting in September you won't be first years anymore, you'll be in second, and that means the rest of the house won't be able to afford to look out for you the same way. There'll be a new bunch of first years in the dungeons, and it'll be your job to look after them same as you were this year. Let Slytherin down and I'll make you regret it, understood?"

"Yes sir!" And it was cute watching the five actual children in the compartment look petrified by what they'd just been told. Whatever anxiety the Prefect left them with faded by the time they were well on their way back to London. Everyone shelled out the last of their school money to raid the snack cart when the same old witch as always came toddling by the door.

"I like Zabini, I hope he makes Head Boy next year." Everybody paused a little bit to look up at Higgs when he spoke around a mouthful of cauldron cake, Feliciano was personally too caught up trying to convert how much wizard money they'd just spent into Euros. This was a lot of candy.

"I thought you wanted your brother to get it instead?"

"Don't tell 'im this, but Tom's a bit too stupid for Head Boy."

The games were a little cramped with too many people in the compartment, but Feliciano got to return a nearly-forgotten favour to England and caught him in the side of the head with a jet of water when a particularly loud snap from the card game set a lock of his blonde hair on fire.

"Why?"

"You're the one who leaned over!"

"So, everyone, this summer..." Scorpius was absolutely hell-bent on getting anybody to come visit him over the summer. Feliciano was surprised when England boldly announced in his fed-up kind of way that yes, he was going to spend a week at Malfoy Manor some time over break.
"I can ask my mum." Higgs had a slow way of answering the question, but he didn't put up the same fight Feliciano had to: he would be travelling all the way from Rome, and it just didn't seem feasible when he'd rather spend the same amount of time in Berlin.

"You've got your own broomstick, right Higgs? Bring it along and we can go flying in the woods around the house!"

"Definitely. Make sure you bring yours too, Kirkland." England was trying to focus on his chess game and completely ignore the issue. Feliciano had already decided that he would rather eat nothing but plain bread and bland pork roast for the next six years than make the investment in a racing broomstick just to fit in with a group of kids. Yes, he had the money, but he also had better things to spend it on.

Like literally anything that wasn't an enchanted dust-buster.

"Is your dad on the train, Scorpius?" He didn't have a good reason for asking, Feliciano just didn't have a reason not to ask. "Are you going home with him today?"

"Naw," But his friend was just interested in trying to catch Gamp's chocolate frog when it leaped straight across the compartment and into his lap. He fought with it for a few seconds before snatching it off the wall and forcing it back into her laughing hands. "Teachers usually stay back for a couple days after the end of term, he'll either come home by Floo powder or apparate somewhere into the house when no one's looking."

"Somewhere?" Arthur let himself lose the chess game and looked up as Higgs scooted over to get a turn at the board. Scorpius just shrugged at the question.

"Last year he jumped out the pantry and gave Grandma such a scare she almost fainted. Think he thought it was mum."

"Impossible," One of the other girls by the name of Laura Finnick spoke up. "My father says Professor Malfoy's too terrifyingly strict for pranks like that."

"He's strict at school, yeah, I was terrified of him on my birthday this year. But it's not the same when everyone's on break." Now Feliciano was curious, maybe this was why Scorpius was desperate for his classmates to come over to his house? "You would have loved it over Christmas, Vargas. He put a jinx on the back of my grandfather's head so his hair changed colour every time he named one. Mother insisted we all sing a few songs and I thought my Grandma was going to go mad trying not to laugh at him."

Feliciano didn't know what the Malfoy Family's history was, or Draco Malfoy himself, but when he looked across the compartment at the mesmerized look on England's face, he knew there was probably a deeper meaning hidden under Scorpius's account. The boy didn't seem to notice that what he was saying was so strange to the rest of them, but the nation sitting next to him looked like he'd just been handed a delicately formed present, and he shut his mouth and blinked the misty look out of his eyes before anyone except Feliciano could notice.

Scotland's familiar face was waiting for them on the platform again when the Hogwarts express pulled into London. He was having a chat with Scorpius' mother and they found out later in the car that Scotland had kept his word and agreed to lunch and a walking tour of St. Mungos before they'd arrived on the platform to pick up the students.

"Sorry, squirt. Looks like you're spending a chunk of your summer out in Wiltshire."
"Good, since I was going to ask you about that as soon as we got home." No hugs again between the two British brothers, and no surprise appearance by Lovino this time although Feliciano did stand right up on his toes and crane his neck around looking for him just in case. Instead, he saw the back of Rose Weasley's head as she was pulled into a hug by a smiling witch with frizzy brown hair. The other Weasley and Potter children were all in a cluster with adults standing tall and proud around them, and Feliciano dropped back down on his heels to pay attention to the conversation in front of him.

"Gotta get this little one on his way back to Italy, but I should be able to ship Arthur off to you sometime around the beginning of August, Mrs. Malfoy."

"You make him sound like a package, Mister Kirkland." Mrs. Malfoy had the sense of humour Scorpius had talked about his dad having, chuckling with an arm around her son where Scorpius himself was bouncing on his toes bursting with the good news coming at him.

"Aye, but you see it's just that simple." And since they weren't in the same massive rush like they'd been caught in at Christmas, Scotland was relaxed and held his hands up to mark dimensions about half the size of Feliciano's school trunk. "Ye just get a box about this big, poke a few holes in the top and make sure there's enough snacks for the journey. Ain't that right, boy?"

"I think I hate you." England was not impressed.

"Well! Until August then, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Of course, Mister Kirkland. Scorpius?"

"Bring your broom, Kirkland, don't forget! And Vargas- see you next year, alright? September first!"

"Yes! Enjoy your summer, Scorpius!"

"Bye!"

Feliciano stayed on the platform waving until Scotland a firm pull on his sleeve to get him going, only letting go once he turned around properly and scampered along through the enchanted exit from the platform. They still couldn't speak plainly until they were right out of the train station and loading their trunks and cases up into the back of a London taxi.

"Now don't you two go telling me I need to come up with an awful story about how you both died between now and August," was the first thing he said straight to both of them once they climbed in the car and Scotland gave the address for England's town house.

"Don't worry, we're going back." England answered for him, and then he stared straight at Feliciano like that was somehow a bad thing. "We are definitely going back."

"Don't look at me like that; I'm not the one who agreed to a sleep-over." So Feliciano teased him, it was the only appropriate thing to do.

"Oh no, we're not even going to pretend that this isn't your fault." England huffed back at him, and he kept his bad mood up all the way to the house.

In fact, he kept the bad mood up right until Feliciano, in adult attire and his cross in a charmed box in England's basement, waved good-bye to his bitter host at the airport the next day.

"Enjoy your summer!" Feliciano called back from the first row of security doors.
"Go roll in a bed of ants!" England answered, middle-finger raised high before he turned away and stormed out of the terminal.

Humph. Big baby.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the first year chapters, which I actually edited and pared down about a year and a half ago. Year 2 is next and I'm hoping to get a start on that this week- but I make no promises as to when those chapters will go live.

Thank you for your kudos and comments!
All of June and July of that year was devoted to Arthur’s work. Specifically: to catching up and getting used to having Scotland in places where Scotland usually wasn't supposed to be. They had a scuffle just walking around the United Nations complex in the Netherlands, and it came to a head when they realized there was only one red seat on the security council for the United Kingdom.

If at any point Arthur had expected Scotland to kindly step down, he was wrong. Not only wrong: but out-right corrected by his own bashful but legally sound human envoy. Arthur Kirkland’s paperwork and dignitary badges had already lapsed months ago. Nations were not human and did not do things the human way, except for when they did.

The younger, stronger, richer, more accomplished and better looking brother had to sit in the blue chair, the ugly older brother claimed the Veto position alongside America, Russia, China and France.

France was an ugly nation.

"I took the liberty of ordering a special children's lunch for you this afternoon."

"Go eat dirt."

And Francis Bonnefoy was no better.

"Should you really be letting a minor drink like that, Scotland?"

"Alright, France, simmer down." Not that Arthur's brother really helped things along. "It's only coffee after all."

And after France, it was America.

"So, you're totally coming out to California next month to-"

"America I told you." America was a great big child wrapped up in an even bigger child’s body. When they met up a few weeks later in Beijing for an energy summit, Arthur was more interested in standing as close to the air-conditioner as possible than with trying to explain to the bouncing hyperpower that he was going to be busy in August. "I have important Ministry business next month. I'll be out of contact for at least a week, possibly as long as two, and I've barely been in touch with Italy all summer, so-"

"Oh, that's cause I sent some of my guys down there to help Italy out with some stuff." It was getting harder to talk to the other nations about the Vargas brothers, because while England still thought of Feliciano as "Italy" due to the extended contact, everyone else had begun switching to calling him "Veneziano" while his older brother became just "Italy". It all depended on who you spent the most time with.

"What do you mean 'sent some guys down'?

"Italy promoted a new General back in May and said him and his brother were gonna be under his command for most of summer for training." Well that certainly explained why Feliciano hadn't been returning any Arthur's messages about work or Hogwarts. "So, we got to talking and I offered to share my expertise on the matter. About two hundred of my marines are in Rome right now for joint training until the end of summer. It's a pretty sweet program too, I mean, I can send you the-"
"America, did you just tell me that you convinced South Italy to enlist North Italy in an eight-week joint training program, despite how much backlog the two of us have to get through just with everyday government housekeeping?"

America must have heard something very different from what Arthur meant. They were on break with England sipping a specialty tea China was trying to push internationally so he let the larger nation think very hard on the question before looking sorry.

"I guess I didn't think of it that way," he admitted. "I mean, I was gonna go join them after this conference, but-

"Oh, don't look so pathetic. I'm just disappointed knowing you thought up something that clever before Scotland or I."

It also made Arthur's plans to spend a portion of August far more agreeable than he'd been prepared for. Listening to Italy hysterically scream over the phone "Please let me go with you! Take me with you! I can't do this anymore I need to go home! America's soldiers are monsters- this is the worst summer vacation ever!" just made Arthur Kirkland smirk under his breath and go fix up his charm for his engagement.

A small trunk was packed up with clothes he'd simply given in and purchased himself as a small boy with a small wallet of cash.

Now a little bit taller than he'd been a month previous on the train from Hogwarts, Arthur was no less dizzy when he put the spell back on. The embarrassment hit when he came upstairs to find an angry owl scowling from his open window, a letter from the ministry of magic in its beak before it practically spat the envelope at him and took away.

"And a good day to you too, sir!" he scoffed.

It was a letter from the Ministry of Magic, informing Arthur Kirkland "Sr." that Arthur Kirkland "Jr." had performed an illegal act of magic, and if he repeated the infraction while out of school he could face punishments ranging from a suspension or expulsion from Hogwarts School, or even having his wand snapped. He wanted to be angrier than embarrassed by this, but failed. He couldn't even blame Scotland as registering with Hogwarts would have automatically brought him under the full effects of the law. They were just lucky no one at the Ministry had dug too deeply into why he hadn't been registered prior to age eleven.

"Are you seriously taking that?" Scotland asked when he arrived at the flat. It was nearly time to head to Malfoy Manor.

"He said to bring a broom."

Arthur considered bringing the dry mop from his closet, but he did in fact go down into his basement and dig out a legitimate racing broom for the occasion.

"It's gotta be at least thirty years old, Arthur."

"He said to bring a broom."

"Have it your way."

There were numerous ways to get to Wiltshire and most of them involved cars or trains, but the Malfoys weren't a half-blood family or muggleborn by any stretch. As nice as Mrs. Astoria Malfoy was on the King's Cross platform and as fair as her husband Draco Malfoy was at the school, there
were certain expectations that the Kirklands knew to meet.

"We can apparate or we can Floo powder."

"If I use a speck more magic that owl will swoop in and take my wand away."

"Floo it is."

Scotland went with a splendid dark blue robe over a fine black suit, he'd even dug his white willow wand out of wherever sock-drawer in Edinburgh he'd left it in previously. If Arthur hadn't already known that the Greengrass family had Scottish roots down one side, Arthur might have been suspicious of his brother's intentions what with coming along with him and making contact with the Malfoys.

Arthur himself took advantage of his apparent age and went in long khaki shorts and simple red trainers. A green striped shirt made him look positively infantile as he followed Scotland through the green smoke and light of the floo powder gateway in his basement.

"Malfoy Manor!"

And one hair-raising ride through the floo network later, he was stepping out of a very clean and well-tended stone hearth, and his senses immediately reacted to his new surroundings.

Because it was so clean.

It actually made him stop and give a little jump, surprise freezing him up for a few moments. Arthur looked up to the tall windows surrounding the sitting room where he'd just arrived, the panes of bright summer sunlight brushing gently against green curtains and silver tassels. The colours blended neatly with the surgical purity of freshly plastered white walls and gilded portraits of some sneering, others preening, and even one dozing Malfoy ancestor.

The house was clean, and not in the nit-picky sense of swept floors and scrubbed windows, but mystically, spiritually, it was completely pure.

The last time Arthur Kirkland had set foot in this place, it had been so rank with black magic and death that, really, he'd quite lost his appetite simply looking at the place from afar. Whatever the family had done, it had taken an astounding amount of magic to purify what had once been an absolutely vile complex.

"Young Mister Kirkland's had quite a bit to say about you." And that magic had no doubt come from the Witch and Wizard who were there and happily greeting Scotland and Arthur where his brother had stepped out of the hearth already. Professor Malfoy was in the middle of a pleasant greeting, hand still in Scotland's for a firm shake as Arthur gathered his senses. Malfoy’s normal white and green robes had been retired for what seemed like a far more relaxed outfit of rich amber buckled across the front with black clasps.

"Aye, nothing kind I imagine from a boy like him."

"Not nearly as bad as you'd think." The Professor urged.

"What?" Arthur blundered.

Astoria Malfoy must have already performed the introduction, because Scorpius' mother was draped in a luscious red robe with a black edge that matched her husband's just enough to compliment him. Obviously, appearances were critical, because her make-up was almost impossible to see save the
dark red kiss on her lips, and her eyes were sparkling gently as she waved a hand in Arthur's
direction to get his attention. He was stopped by Scotland turning around and looking at him.

"What's this? Gone soft have you? Think I can't handle the truth, tyke?"

"Only in public you great oaf," he bit back, stepping around Scotland's leg and wearing through a
scolding look from Scorpius' mother, her rose red lips puckered as she shook her head just enough to
tell him no, she didn't like him saying mean things like that.

"There, that's more like it." But Scotland was pleased and obviously a bit too comfortable with these
people, because he immediately raised his voice in a stern and half-threatening tone of voice: "So see
here, Malfoy, I won't have you coddling the boy, not one bit." And the jibe was received surprisingly
well, because it was the first time in years that Arthur ever heard Draco Malfoy laugh.

"You have my word. Maybe we'll string the boys up by their thumbs after dinner and let them hang
like that for a few hours."

"An ideal suggestion, sir. Missus Malfoy, your husband has an excellent sense of discipline."

"Oh, that's enough you two. You'll scare the poor boy." Arthur nearly stuck his tongue out at
Scotland when it was his turn for a scolding. Professor Malfoy swept a hand over the couch next to
him and invited Scotland to sit and take tea, which he accepted, and Mrs. Malfoy got Arthur's
attention again with a soft touch at his wrist.

"Scorpius should just be outside with his grandfather, but I think the floo powder-"

There was a bang somewhere in the house that sounded like a door practically flying off its hinges, a
grown man's laugh and then the low roar of something magical moving very quickly through the
house.

Astoria Malfoy's pleasant smile fell, and then she was standing with her wand out and pointed at the
large open doorway connecting this chamber to the rest of the house.

"Scorpius Lucius Malfoy." She didn't shout, oh no, a woman like Astoria Malfoy simply did not raise
her voice. What she did do was give a delicate flick of her wand which caused a shimmer to pass
over the doorframe, and as soon as the swooping blur of a child on a broomstick came into view
Scorpius was snatched off the flying vessel by what looked like the lacquered body of a massive
soap bubble. "What have I told you about flying in the house?"

"But Mum-!" Arthur had never seen Scorpius look so filthy, not even after an extended lesson of
Herbology with Longbottom. "The green smoke, we saw it burst out the chimney top!"

Scorpius' broom was not forgotten in all of this, but with an impressive show of power Astoria
Malfoy merely turned her wrist and summoned the broom to screech (silently) to a halt in mid-air and
drift down into her waiting grasp. Arthur recognized the summoning charm after a few moments so it
wasn't really wandless magic, but it was impressive none the less.

Scorpius' bubble let him down gently where he'd been suspended some four feet in the air for the
duration of his scolding, but while the chatter behind Arthur had fallen flat to watch the exchange,
Scotland's voice picked up again once the matter seemed settled, a bit more laughter easing whatever
trouble Scorpius might otherwise have found him in.

"Mister Kirkland."

"Arthur, ma'am, if that's quite alright." He thought she was speaking to Scotland when he found Mrs.
Malfy looking at him instead, she was smiling, a little exasperated with the boy who came trampling mud and grass in over the lavish green rugs covering the stone floors, but still refined and in complete control of herself.

"Of course it is. Arthur, as Scorpius knows: I forbid flying in my house. While you're here I also don't want to see any ministry owls for either of you from silly wand waving. Understood?"

Perfectly. And for understanding simple rules they both earned a warm look, and a kiss for Scorpius on the forehead- followed by a flick of dirt off his shoulder and onto the rug where it promptly vanished.

"Run along and play then." With a final wave of her wand Arthur heard the dry huff of his trunk scraping the carpet before it lifted itself into the air and began to drift across the room, presumably to wherever he would be sleeping. Scorpius interrupted this at once.

"Mum- Mum!" The trunk didn't stop but Astoria did look at him, so Scorpius didn't hesitate. "His broom- you did bring your broom, right?"

"Eh... Yes." He heard Scotland give a low laugh and mutter something over his head.

"Wait until you get a look at this, Malfoy, you'll appreciate it I'm sure."

"Stuff it!" Arthur yelled back, looking over at his trunk where it had paused. Astoria Malfoy's wand gave an extremely fast flicker like she was ringing a tiny bell at the end of it, the trunk unlocked, and out popped Arthur's broomstick before the rest of his belongings were pulled right back inside and the case resumed its flight upstairs.

The broom hovered on its own, a soft accio spell bringing it closer so Arthur could get a hand on it. Scorpius, not always the most patient, quickly grabbed the staff end and got a look at the gold lettering on the head of the broom.

"A Nimbus Two-Thousand and One!?" He exclaimed, sounding horrified. "My dad's got one of those, positively ancient model. Nimbus went out of business years ago didn't they, dad?"

"Scorpius." Mrs. Malfoy scolded.

Professor Malfoy had his face in one hand and looked like he was desperately trying not to laugh. Scotland made some lame excuse about Arthur's actual broom having been the victim of a magical upset during the school year.

"But isn't it old?" Scorpius insisted,

"Yes, it's old but it flies just fine, thank you!" Arthur bit back, surprised with how hot he felt under the collar as he snatched his broom back and clutched the polished body tight in both hands. "And what's that then, a Cleansweep Fourty-Nine?"

"Why don't you boys take this discussion and those brooms outside then?" Professor Malfoy suggested; his laughter under control where his smile looked a bit friendlier now than is usually did at school. "Scorpius' grandfather has built quite the course through the trees along the back end of the property, and it's miles from any muggle roads so there's no chance of anyone seeing them."

"And Lucius Malfoy, I understand, the one and only?" Scotland asked.

"Quite. Astoria, darling, come sit down. The boys can find their own way, I'm sure."
"C'mon, Kirkland! We- well, I'll try and go easy on you if you're riding that old thing."

"And I'm going to make you eat those words." Arthur answered, fighting inside with the sting of jealousy that bit when he found himself being hurried through the clean white halls of Malfoy Manor and away from a conversation he otherwise really should have been present for and paying attention to. The adults' voices faded swiftly behind them as Scorpius moved at a quick pace to get them out of the house without actually running. They carried their broomsticks out through a pair of wide-open French doors and into the bright summer sunshine.

Arthur wanted to take comfort in the heat and the August afternoon, but that was quashed immediately when he looked down across the rolling green grass spreading down and away from the manor. He saw an old man in long black wizard's robes trudging up the freshly raked gravel path towards them. He had a black cane in one hand and his long silvery hair was blustering about in a bit of wind coming off the moor spread far around the estate, and Scorpius either sensed Arthur's apprehension or had just experienced this set-up too many times to be caught unawares again.

"That's my grandfather." He said quickly, if a bit nervously so that Arthur had to turn around and look at his nervous little face. "Now, just don't say anything and it should all be fine. He's really not that bad, love him to death I do, he just-

"Scorpius!"

The boy panicked, and his words came out like a frightened squeak:

"He makes it hard to have friends."

"And who's this then?" In his prime Lucius Malfoy had been a wizard Arthur had known by sight and vice-versa. He was quite used to always being the same age when meeting a human of any sort after spending years apart, so it was something uncanny and down-right wrong to find himself looking up at a wizard who had begun to hunch over and shrink as age caught up with his nasty soul. The foulness Arthur had once associated with Malfoy Manor still clung to the former Patriarch, the stench was greatly reduced, of course, but there was still a filth that remained: the subtle stink of prejudice that had fallen out of favour and was simply intolerable to bear in polite company anymore. "Another lowborn like that Higgs you mentioned?"

"Higgs won't be coming until tomorrow, grandpa." Scorpius had a look on his face like he could see two very breakable objects screaming towards the floor, and he had no idea which one to dive for and catch as his eyes flashed between Arthur and his grandfather. "This is Arthur, another Slytherin boy from Hogwarts. One of the smartest in our year, no doubt, beat that Weasley girl by a mile."

"Which Weasley?"

"A-All of them, I think?" He'd just told Arthur not to talk and now he was looking at him to dig him out of the hard question. Arthur'd lost his marks under oil prices and various dates for the Royal Tour he'd quickly participated in across New Zealand and Australia a week earlier. He had to think very hard and very fast to come up with an answer.

"If you're talking about Rose Weasley, yes; five points up across the board, except transfiguration, but I still blame Vargas for that." The idiot had bumped his arm in the middle of their final examination. Imagine, he, Arthur Kirkland, failing to turn a rabbit into a fine felt hat!

There was a pause where Lucius Malfoy was staring his grandson down hard as if about to demand to know why Arthur had also beaten Scorpius at exam time, but then a much more pertinent question struck the former death eater.
"Arthur what?" He asked, and while Scorpius squirmed Arthur simply answered.

"Kirkland, sir."

"Kirkland?"

"I know it's not the biggest of the pureblood lines, grandpa but really--"

"No." Lucius Malfoy cut his grandson off with a word and swung his black cane up like a bar between the two children. Arthur was hardly impressed by the intimidation tactic that even had Scorpius huffing under his breath, not quaking with real fear. The boy was more worried about being embarrassed; this sort of behaviour from Lucius must have been commonplace as far as guests went. "I know that name."

"And I know yours, sir, for much the same reason you're thinking of." Because Arthur Kirkland from the Ministry of Magic had taken in several death eaters during the war. He'd seen men like Lucius- in fact, he'd seen Lucius himself, from the other side of the cell door in Azkaban. "Might we use your flying course now? Scorpius' been going on about it like mad all year."

"Kirklands have a habit of crashing into people's lives and creating a great stir before up and vanishing again like ghosts."

"Are you saying I'm actually dead, Mister Malfoy, sir?" Arthur said as innocently as he could which meant it came out positively rude and there was nothing he could do to bother taking it back.

"I'm saying your father, if that's who you're named after, is the one who should be dead: twice over."

"Grandpa!" The boy next to him sounded positively scandalized, and immediately forced his way between Arthur and the aged, addled wizard with both arms out and his broom forgotten to tip over onto the ground. "Grandpa you can't say things like that! We're in the same house and Arthur's one of my-"

"Lucius!"

All three of them turned and looked up at the shrill voice that came from the door to the house behind them. Malfoy Manor was at least three stories tall with gargoyles mounted over the gutters at the edge of the roof, and with the added vantage of being on a hill it was an even more impressive frame for the witch standing in that doorway, tiny though she was, and commanding the entire space with her simple presence.

"Narcissa."

"Leave the boys to their games, Lucius; Draco is asking for you."

"Tell him to wait-"

"I'm telling you to come."

Men of the Malfoy household appeared quite powerless in the face of strong, confident women. Lucius Malfoy didn't try to argue with the white-haired witch garbed in strong indigo and trailing black frills. Her presence was very different from Astoria Malfoy's, and Arthur couldn't remember Narcissa Malfoy being quite so commanding during the war. Maybe betraying the Dark Lord to his face, something she'd grown famous for after the war, had installed a stainless-steel backbone in Scorpius' grandmother.
Lucius Malfoy didn't even bother to pretend the exchange had been polite or that he was sorry. He did break eye-contact with Arthur to look at Scorpius, and there was a brief softness that almost eased Arthur's heart before it, and the former death eater, were both gone.

There was a rattle of the French doors sliding closed, and then Scorpius turned around at once.

"I'm sorry!"

"It's al-"

"No, I'm so sorry!" Scorpius hadn't inherited the sliminess that came from a lot of bigoted old pure-blood families. Arthur was curious about how much of that was thanks to his father's experiences in the war, or his mother's influence as a member of one of the less radical families. "I tell him not to be like that but he does it anyways. I have two cousins on mum's side that I have to go visit with her in secret because he's just awful about their dad being a half-blood. I don't know why he pulled all that about your family either, dad told him your surname weeks ago, I just-"

"Scorpius!" Arthur interrupted, already a little tired of the unnecessary apology. "It's fine, you're forgetting who got in a fight with Rose Weasley over a stupid owl, remember?" The child didn't look completely convinced, but he did seem a little more at ease listening to Arthur interrupt him. "If you want to make it up to me then you're going to hand those over: I haven't got a pair."

"These?" Scorpius was baffled until he put a hand up on his hair where Arthur was pointing, and found the set of flying goggles strapped over his head where he'd pulled them up.

"You want to fly, don't you? Don't tell me I brought my broom all this way for nothing."

A wordless grin and a set of goggles was all Arthur got in return for his comment. That, and his young friend quickly fetching his broom off the ground where it had fallen. Scorpius swung a leg over it before kicking into the air and hovering a few inches off the gravel path.

"Race you there," he challenged while Arthur mounted up after him, a lot less steady on his nimbus as the broom woke up after over two decades of deep sleep.

"Now hang on-"

"And I do mean race!"

"Get back here, you idiot! I don't even know which way we're going!"

And that was the way of Arthur's actual summer vacation.
Second Year

Going back to England at the end of the summer wasn't as terrible as Feliciano'd imagined it would be at the beginning of the season.

"You're a jerk."

"I was right there with you the entire damned time!"

"Still a jerk."

But it was still hard.

Training with his military hadn't been all bad, in fact it had helped him recharge better than he would have just hanging around Rome or touring quickly through his cities and countryside. England didn't suffer much homesickness by staying at Hogwarts: he was surrounded by his people, young as they were, and that could keep any nation content. Magical children were a little bit off sometimes, but they were still children, and they were still beautiful to be around even if you couldn't connect with them on a national level.

Being stranded on a military base with four hundred Italian soldiers and two hundred American yahoos for eight weeks had a similar kind of niceness. Feliciano would have greatly preferred being sent to, say, an eight-week soccer camp or an Olympic training meet or a cultural works project, brother, did you not even read those letters? But it wasn't all bad. His platoon was ingrained on his memory and his spirit even deeper than the students he'd run around with for an entire academic year, he knew them better and he, arguably, cared more too.

Patriotic love, in the end, was what got him back on the train to Hogwarts for a second year under the effects of the de-aging charm. He'd forgotten how uncomfortable the cold silver cross was against his skin after he was welcomed into England's London house and then scolded for still wearing his uniform.

"You can't have a muggle officer's uniform in your trunk when you get to school!"

"And what did you expect me to wear on the plane? I was only released this morning!"

The uniform went back to Rome in a sealed package, and Feliciano went with England for another last-minute shopping spree down Diagon Alley for his second-year books. They'd made the same mistake as last year: Feliciano had kept his letter of acceptance instead of parcelling it off to Scotland to get the errand running done.

So, as a punishment, Feliciano had to wear the charm, but Arthur Kirkland (Sr.) did not.

"You're an even bigger jerk than my-"

"The train leaves tomorrow, keep up now: I won't have you falling behind!"

His twelve-year old arms were slightly stronger than the younger set he'd worn before, but it was a shallow difference. England was only half as considerate as his big brother when he made Feliciano huff and puff and waddle behind him with his arms full of second-year books, a new quill set and a replacement bottle of green ink. All of this was paid for by him of course, and England hadn't even brought a tote bag of some kind for him to use, magical or otherwise.
They avoided meeting anyone they knew by name in the Alley, with the narrow exception of Albus and James Potter. They were on their way back to the Leaky Cauldron for dinner and Feliciano was too exhausted to keep up. A particularly loud bang from the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes shop caused a stumble in the flow of traffic through the wizarding quarter and caused Feliciano to drop his parcels by accident. England actually helped him gather it all up again before they hurried right past the cluster of laughing wizards and witches who stumbled out the smoking doorway. There were children and teens yelling loudly blaming each other for the chaos, with laughter and hugs and clasped hands.

They seemed like a very happy family, overall.

"Hurry up, unless you want to deal with the entire Potter-Weasley clan." England scolded, stepping between Feliciano and the noise of the joke-shop. He thought he saw a familiar boy with black hair and a bigger, happier grin on his laughing face than Feliciano was used to seeing at Hogwarts. He wasn't against the idea of seeing Rose Weasley and Albus Potter again before getting on the train, but it was easy to see why it would be better not to interact with them while he was burdened with so many school supplies and following someone who was supposed to be his classmate's (other, adoptive) older brother.

It was all too much noise and confusion, so they left the Alley quietly and with fast steps. England hailed a muggle cab to carry them back home where Feliciano's suitcase was forced to take the new books along with the burden of clothes. Neither of them could use magic to make the packing any easier, and the volume of necessary items was what made it so much different from packing for a business trip. Feliciano's electronics were packed up in a drawer in England's guest bedroom, along with his Italian passport and security badge from work, and then his wallet with its muggle money and cards was stowed away as well. There was no way to put a charm on it without getting in trouble with the British Ministry, but Feliciano also knew what a bad sign of faith it would be to enchant the drawer when the only person who might come through the house before Christmas was Scotland.

The next day Scotland took them to King's Cross Station and stepped onto the enchanted platform with them. He lingered for a few minutes just for appearance's sake before vanishing back out into Muggle London. Just like the year before, Feliciano and England boarded the train and tried not to get stepped on by upperclassmen as they searched quickly for a compartment to hide in.

"Over here!"

A familiar voice and a fluttering hand wave from one compartment door got them both to hurry up and come face to face with Eliza Gamp, already bundled up in her Slytherin robes and school uniform, grinning wide and surprisingly happy to usher them into the compartment.

"Kirkland!"

"You're finally here, Vargas!"

Scorpius Malfoy was sitting in the compartment and jumped up so he could grab England by the wrist and swing him down into a spot on the seat next to him. Feliciano shut the compartment door quickly before he was jerked around by Charles Higgs getting a handful of his shirt and shoving him a little bit.

"You ignored all my letters: you'd better have a good reason." Higgs could be a bully if he wanted to, he was still round-faced and a little heavy, but for a child he was strong enough to almost send Feliciano off his seat with that push. Getting a good look at him though, the boy was more upset than angry, and most of that was bundled up well.
"I thought I saw you in Diagon Alley yesterday," Gamp's black hair was braided around over her shoulder in a long rope, her white face innocent with a tiny little nose and wide, dark eyes that had always been full of tears last year. She made Feliciano and Higgs move over so she could sit back down again, and her toes scraped the floor where a few months ago they'd been hanging inches above the carpet. "But who was that man you were with, Vargas?"

"What were you doing all summer?" And then even Scorpius felt the need to chime in without letting him take a breath! "You were impossible to get a hold of."

"Ve! My brother packed me off to a muggle program all summer." He'd thought about lying to cover up where he'd been, there hadn't been any real time between getting back to Rome and grabbing his bag for the airport to address the stack of letters that had piled up through the mail slot with children's handwriting. Lovino hadn't said anything about them either, but they were a thick bundle at the bottom of his trunk right now.

"Muggles!?"

If he'd said he'd spent all summer mucking around with rats and enchanted tea pots his classmates might have reacted better, but across from him England was just laughing at their astounded, borderline horrified expressions.

"Our families work in Muggle Relations, it's really not that uncommon." Thankfully, England was able to lend him a little bit of support trying to explain things. "We do a bunch of travelling around to important muggle places, but even I could have told you what an awful deal Vargas got this year."

"What?"

"What happened?" The others were hanging on England's every word, and Feliciano just felt a sudden sleepiness wash over him that he eased by closing his eyes and rubbing his face with both hands, whining over England's suspenseful account with his own version:

"It wasn't all that bad."

"Muggle military drills?" England challenged, and when Feliciano looked again he saw more than the usual glint in the other nation's eyes. He was making fun of Feliciano's decades- no, centuries long hatred for combat training.

"Alfred and my brother were both there, it was okay."

"Alfred's also a demon when it comes to those sorts of things though." This was true, but Feliciano wasn't willing to argue about it.

Explaining and describing everything to the other students took a lot of tender navigation, Feliciano's mind taking a more complicated path than he probably needed to rationalize how a twelve year old boy had been kept busy or had his presence justified on a military compound for two months. He regretted not just saying he'd been penned up with relatives when he realized his convoluted story was going to have to hold for however long it took the children around him to completely forget his wacky summer adventure.

Finally, after patiently waiting for Feliciano to get all of that out of the way, Scorpius got to say whatever it was that had him practically vibrating in his seat the entire time.

"Quidditch...!" Nevermind the 'practically', Scorpius was actually bouncing on his seat and coming apart with excitement. It was adorable, and the way England cupped his own chin in one hand and watched with a tolerant smile said he'd been like this over summer too. "We get to try out this year!
Slytherin team lost our seeker and two chasers who were all in seventh year before summer, so who else is going to try out?"

"My brother's a chaser," Higgs spoke up, fidgeting around a little and peering at the compartment door waiting for the witch with the sweets cart to amble by. Feliciano was getting hungry too. "Tom made it to captain this year, and he wants to have try-outs as soon as possible."

"Do you think we'll get a good team this year?" England asked, both nations trying to push more enthusiasm than they really felt onto the conversation. It was hard to get really excited about a sport such a small portion of your population even knew existed. "It was a little hard to watch last year, who was it who got sent into the stands in the Ravenclaw Match?"

"Lucy Harper, she's still on the team."

The rest of the day's talk was dominated by Quidditch. Feliciano's interest in the topic waned until he was left doing a bit of his remaining summer homework that had been left behind while he was off training. Eventually England coaxed Scorpius' chess board out from under his arm and set up a game between them. It was dangerous to pit two nations against each other in a game of kings and war, but it was boring to cross into the Scottish Highlands with nothing but potions homework to do.

"What about you two?" Neither of them looked up when Gamp addressed them, Feliciano knew better than to let his eyes off the board in case England tried to cheat him. They'd been advancing and retreating across the board with minimal action for the last fifteen minutes when Eliza interrupted them, tugging on her braid when she was ignored and giving Feliciano a light kick in the leg.

"I'm no good at it." England stated, fingertips hovering over his bishop where moving it three spaces across the board would set both sides of the game on fire. The strategy was all about knowing when to start taking pieces, and when to hold back on declaring all-out war. "Scorpius put me on his Flashbolt this summer and I went screaming off into the next county."

"You're quite alright on your Nimbus." Scorpius was trying to be encouraging, but Feliciano watched the way England's fingers clenched briefly before he told his rook to retreat away from Feliciano's knight. "But I guess that's fair enough to say. What about you, Vargas?"

"Knight to E5." He said, holding a hand up to show he wasn't ignoring Scorpius, he just needed a second while England went blue in the face across from him.

"That's how you want to go down?" He hissed, watching his rook sail right across the compartment from the harsh kick from Feliciano's knight. "Bishop to E5!"

"Queen to A6."

"Queen to- shit." Feliciano looked up and then gave twelve year old Arthur Kirkland a flick on the forehead for swearing. The other nation didn't even look up where he was examining the board and grinding his teeth in frustration. "How did you bloody well do that?"

His knight took England's queen on the next turn, avenging the bishop that wound up with a permanent chip on the knob of his hat. Ten intense minutes of near silence later, Scorpius gave a shallow whisper at England's ear that everybody heard.

"He's got you."

"He does not."

"Oh, yes he does."
This was the danger of two nations playing a game about conquering and killing, and that was why when Feliciano felt his pride swelling up a little bit too high and knew the delicious taste of the words "checkmate" dancing over his lips, he made the only sensible move possible. Instead of letting this turn into a four hour long stand-off that would carry them all the way to Hogsmeade, Feliciano listened for the sound of the snack cart rolling by. As soon as the old witch's shadow appeared, he jumped up and let the fast movement tip the board over and scatter the pieces to the floor.

"Woah!"

"Ah! Sorry, Scorpius. I didn't hurt any of them, did I?"

"N-No? I think they're fine but the game-"

"I'm just really hungry." Interrupting Scorpius's concern helped dispel the cloud of anger rolling through Arthur's eyes. There was an indignity about losing a game like that. Yes, it was only a game, but it hit a little too close to home sometimes and a mouthful of chocolate and pumpkin cream was one of the better ways to deal with it. England needed to calm down and bring Arthur back to the forefront, so Italy and Feliciano were willing to sacrifice a few coins and the gloating triumph of victory to satisfy him.

That was why nations didn't play war games.

"Feeling better?" He asked, their seats switching around so the nations were next to each other while the three children cleaned up candy wrappers and tried to stop the two queens from the chess set from cracking each other with their resin swords after being left on the floor too long. England shrugged at him and licked a bit of icing off his thumb.

"Sorry about that." Was the answer, and then Scorpius remembered the topic they'd mentioned half an hour ago.

"Vargas. Quidditch? Are you going to try out this year or not?"

"I don't really like playing Quidditch." That feeling of being up in the air was nice, but no engine, no roar, not enough of anything for his body to hold onto and meld with while tearing along at high speeds... "I don't have a broom either, so there's no point."

This blew his classmates' minds almost as badly as his summer holiday announcement, and the rest of the train ride and then the long walk to the carriages up the mountain was dominated by the discussion.

He didn't have a broom? How could he not have a broom? Not one broom? In the entire Vargas home there was not one broomstick to be had?

"We have one for sweeping floors, but that's about it." They swept the floors by hand?

"That's it." Feliciano couldn't do this. Children were cute and their interest was adorable, but it had been a four-hour train ride and they still had to get through the banquet with their endurance that wasn't much better now than it had been last year. Feliciano had grown used to doing long runs and parkour courses with America yelling at him to keep running and not slack off all summer in the heat, it was offensive to be this tired after sitting on a train all day playing chess.

So, he did what any respectable nation of three millenia would do, and yanked the edge of England's black robe up so he could hide under it for the remaining carriage ride.

"What the hell are you doing?"
"Sleeping, stop moving."

Gamp was in stitches giggling across the carriage, Scorpius he couldn't see but he was laughing too as England started hitting him to make Feliciano fall out of the robe. Not to be out-done, he promptly wrapped both arms around the other nation's skinny torso and squeezed hard with his head resting between England's back and the padded cushion of the seat.

"You idiot! Let go!"

"No."

"Stop that!"

"No!"

And on and on, until they reached the school and England got fed up before Feliciano was ready to stop hugging him and sit up on his own. He really should have just taken the warnings, because he wasn't ready for the inanimate black cloth to suddenly constrict around him, his world to flip over, and England's weight to suddenly be on top of him with one of Feliciano's legs-

"Ow ow! Okay! Stop! I surrender!"

"Okay, that's enough you two! We're going to get in trouble!"

Gamp scolded them harshly but Scorpius was the one who undid the hex on England's robe so it let Feliciano go and they could untangle themselves. Feliciano hid next to Eliza for the rest of the ride, letting her help him get his hair back in order where the robe had messed it up so red strands were sticking up all over the place. The last thing Scorpius found relevant to say before the carriage rolled to a stop was back on the same topic that had been following them for hours.

"The best flyer in our year doesn't even like quidditch." And he just shook his head sadly, hands up to hold his face like it was the worst news Feliciano could have given him.

"Scorpius, you're exaggerating so much it hurts."

They arrived at the castle shortly after that, joining the other Slytherin second years while the upperclassmen streamed by and the other houses ignored them in favour of getting to the great hall and the waiting meal.

The great hall was exactly as it had been before, ageless and impressive with a ceiling that reflected the starlit sky outside in its rolling enchantments. The Slytherins piled up on their table and took seats, Feliciano ducking and crawling right under the table to snag a seat across from England and with a better view of the wide open space where the sorting ceremony would take place.

"How many you think we'll get this year?" There were seven Slytherins in their year, but Feliciano couldn't answer the question before Headmistress McGonagall, proud and ageless, stood up and led the school through a jaunty song that she'd only heard on special occasions the year before. They sang it once all together with her voice and wand tip leading them through the melody, and then with a genuine smile, she signalled for them to do it again.

Everyone else knew what to do, it was up to the second years across all four tables to hurry and catch up.

"Hogwarts! Hogwarts! Hoggy warty Hogwarts!"
The first time Feliciano had heard this song he'd sworn his competence with English had collapsed, because it was absolutely ridiculous to sing and it made England look like he wanted to vanish under the table every time it was mentioned. He blamed its creation on Scotland, Feliciano called it a family effort.

"*Bring back what we've forgot!*"

It wasn't very long though, and even if he missed a few words here and there, the Slytherin table as one had forks and knives in hand to drum and beat on the table, feet stomping as all four houses brought their voices higher and higher, yelling out at different tempos and rhythms in a cacophony of sound that was as bad as the lyrics.

"*Just do your best, we'll do the rest!*"

"*And learn until our brains all rot!*"

And then the sorting. Feliciano counted just under forty terrified children following Professor Flitwick down the middle of the hall, and it was exactly the same as last year: the heavy silence and the smiles from the Deputy Headmaster telling the first years not to panic or faint away. Names were announced clearly once the hat made its appearance, and while the first little girl with tight gold ringlets answered her name and climbed onto the stool, Feliciano heard a whisper at his ear.

"Zabini says if we see any trouble we have to be ready to move." It killed his good mood listening to Scorpius give a warning like that. The way the whole house was waiting for something bad to- 

"*HUFFLEPUFF!*"

Feliciano's eyes scanned the head table. McGonagall, Longbottom, Slughorn, Desford, Hagrid, a few more teachers he knew and he didn't, and then he found who he was looking for: Professor Malfoy.

Scorpius' father always wore white and usually highlighted it with Slytherin green. He'd traded in the lighter emerald Feliciano had seen so regularly last year for much darker forest green, and there was silver worked along the edges of his robe now. His hands-

"*RAVENCLAW!*"

ahem. His hands were clapping politely with each new name called and house announced, but he wasn't looking at his own house. He was scanning the other three, and Feliciano watched him make eye contact with Professor Longbottom from further down the table.

"*HUFFLEPUFF!*"

There was a very long pause before either man broke that stare. English or not Feliciano didn't need to have their loyalty to know the spark of a conflict when he saw one.

At the end of the night Slytherin only claimed six new students: three girls and three boys. There was only silence the six times their name was called with Slytherin shouting and cheering while the other three tables remained quiet. It was almost worse than what had happened last year, instead of the entire school firing itself up for good or bad, Slytherin house stood alone to welcome its new members while children for any of the others at least earned steady applause.

Longbottom and Malfoy glared at each other after every sorting.

England looked pale and horrified staring at the empty spaces still left at the Slytherin table, none of
the numbers adding up in his head: why so few?

The feast began with a word from the Headmistress, but the silent distress was still hanging in the air. She smiled and she said kind things that brightened the candles hovering overhead under the illusionary sky.

The food was summoned, the feast began, and with a first-year class forty percent smaller than any other house, Slytherin table formed a tight blockade of second- and third-year students around the fledglings who inched their way up to chatter and get to know their new family.

And the two ministry officials hiding in the middle of it started drafting letters in their heads.
"I imagine you want to do more investigating this year, but do you at least have an idea of where to start?"

Arthur was not interested in allowing the school year to amble by without getting any substantial work done. Really, most of Italy's snooping should have wrapped up the year previous when the wounds had been fresher and the students' memories sharper. He had done quite a bit of poking around Slytherin house, but with the current batch of seventh years too busy with their grades and their dating conundrums to worry about a classmate now two years dead, it was hard to keep the nations' presence relevant.

At least, that had been Headmistress McGonagall's take on the issue over the summer, but Arthur hadn't been able to dissuade Italy, and they had tentatively agreed to go through with the entire seven year haul. Lord knew: there was more than enough tension between the houses to keep two nations on their toes observing and, at times, even taking part in the horrors.

"Higgs!" Taking part in their own way, at least, even if that didn't mean following what their housemates wanted or expected.

"'Bout time you two got." Charles Higgs looked back over his shoulder and found Arthur Kirkland's wand aimed directly between his eyes. The shock made him come to a complete stop, which was precisely what Arthur wanted as Italy dove around from the other side looking like he might bite their friend's wrist until he let go of the student he'd got tight around the neck.

"Are you both bonkers!? Don't point that thing at me, Kirkland!" There were wands at their feet and Higgs let the student he'd been fighting with slump down the wall to join them. Arthur put his own wand away to show he didn't need a mystic advantage, but bit back with words before tall stupid thick-headed Higgs could think he lowered his wand because he was scared.

"Did you completely forget what Zabini said last week?" He snapped, "Or Professor Malfoy before that? God, man, we're not even through September!"

"This grimy little half-blood-

"Is smaller than Vargas and I don't give a damn about his blood: if you're such a pureblood then act like it!"

The way Higgs pulled his heavy shoulders back under his black robe meant he was enraged, chubby neck going tense and mouth rolling over itself trying to stay shut and not say anything. But big as he was Higgs was still a boy, a child, and turning around to have two of his friends calling him out like this would have been terrible for an adult to handle, nevermind a twelve year old boy.

"Just- just wait until you get to the commons." He growled, but Arthur knew better. There was a shake in him, a flash of hurt in grey eyes that broke away first so he could quickly collect his wand and hurry away. There would be apologies later, but only after getting the full story out of him.

"Here, eat this. I was saving it!" Italy was offering a blue and gold chocolate frog packet to the small boy sitting slumped against the wall. He had a yellow and black tie around his neck, a badger stitched over his breast wreathed in silver, and the house colours matched the tight caramel curls up around his head, freckles spotted over his cheeks and stubby little nose.

"Th... Thanks?" His blue eyes were wide, pale brows up and lashes fanned brightly as he stared up
between them from his spot on the floor. Italy was kneeling next to him and Arthur was still standing there now that Higgs was gone. "Ain't you Slytherins too?" His fingers were shaking a little trying to undo the flap on the little box. He took a frog to the face for his trouble before Italy laughed and pulled the sweet treat off the wall before it could escape completely. The nation handed handing the wiggling thing back to the Hufflepuff boy who grinned and took a big bite.

"Of course we are," Arthur answered, arms crossed watching the interactions unfold. "Never seen Higgs act like that before though."

"Yes so: sorry, but if that was actually your fault then you're going to owe me a frog." Italy said it with a smile that was either completely farcical or down-right threatening, but the Hufflepuff on the floor just nodded sharply to show he understood and, stuffing the rest of the frog in his mouth, stood up and offered a hand.

"Ian Finni-"

"Oi! You snakeskins get away from 'im!"

Ian, if that was his name, still had a mouthful of chocolate when he spun around and was barrelled into by- err, another Ian?

Same tight spun curls, same button nose, same blue eyes- but angry this time, not dazed from losing a fight or smattered with chocolate from the frog's escape attempts. The second Ian jumped in front of the first Ian, wand out and prompting Arthur to get his up again.

Italy just whined.

"But we didn't do anything-!" He looked like he was shaking, the big baby, if he started putting out tears Arthur promised to aim the wand at him instead.

They had to be brothers, and they must have been twins, because while working through the stuffy thickness of sweet chocolate the first Hufflepuff quite simply shuffled around the other and flopped right onto his wand arm, dragging the rod out of the way and putting Arthur in a position to lower his as well.

It turned, almost immediately, into a wrestling match between the bothers.

"Where'd you get chocolate from!"

"They gave it to me- don't step on my wand!"

"Why's it on the floor then!"

Arthur found the rough-housing comedic, but when he looked at Italy there was a painful expression of homesickness on his face watching them bicker.

"Ian and Finn Finnigan." Two voices rattled off at once, the identical boys with identical faces standing shoulder to shoulder now, Ian only distinguishable by the smear of chocolate on the corner of his mouth. "I'm Finn, he's Ian."

"No, I'm Ian and he's Finn." They put an arm around each other and grinned while gesturing to the wrong brother and giving each name. Arthur thought he understood but then realized he didn't, confused by the two faces swimming in front of him.

"Ian?" He said, getting one of them to flash an expectant look at him. Arthur promptly raised his
wand and let a sharp puff of smoke out the end. Ian Finnigan's tight curls flashed bright green and his twin brother grinned widely, before breaking into a laughing fit, hands clapping and body doubled over as he howled.

"Ian, Finn." Bouncing his wand as he said each name, Arthur turned and watched Italy's jaw drop and eyes open wide, pleading with him as he forgot about his own wand and raised both hands up, backing away and babbling 'no please don't!' before Arthur followed through "-Feliciano-" and washed his head with orange.

"You jerk! Why is it always the hair? Why my hair?" Arthur ignored him.

"And Arthur, Arthur Kirkland." He proceeded to introduce himself, not listening to Italy whine and cry about how long it had taken to get rid of the blue last time.

"I think I like how you do things, Kirkland." One of the Finnigan twins laughed, probably Finn since his hair was still the right colour. Ian was pawing wordlessly at his head trying to pull one of his curls straight so he could see exactly how vivid the green was. "But the two of us are in Hufflepuff, we can't show up with green hair!"

"Perhaps you'd prefer a nice fuchsia wash?" Arthur offered instead, jumping away when Italy aimed a pouty little kick at his ankle.

The fun, sadly, was broken up by the distant toll of a bell somewhere through the castle, a signal that the between-class break was over and students only had another five minutes to reach their classes. Arthur was kind enough to remove the hex on Ian until Finn whined about him looking better like that, and the Hufflepuff first years scampered off to join their classmates. Italy fixed his own hair with a few rough prods of his wand and huffed off to get them both to Transfiguration.

Given that Transfiguration was one of Italy's favourite classes, Arthur was forgiven for the minor hex long before either of them were able to explain themselves to Higgs. Scorpius was at another table with their scorned house-mate while the Slytherin girls drew lots with the ends of their wands to see who would have to sit with a Ravenclaw boy who looked no less disgusted with his fate.

"You know what I want to do?" Italy commented, relaxed and happy once the lecturing part of Professor Parkinson's Transfiguration lesson was over.

"What, eat lunch and take a nap?" They were turning sheets of origami paper into flowers, Arthur half-constructing a few roses before taking more care to create one with dark red petals and a bit of gold edging along the top.

"Hmm, I always love taking naps, but what I want..." Italy wasn't even bothering to slow down and create a few sub-par flowers. He was stringing his daisies together in a flower crown, the sleek black length of his wand curling and spiralling through the air to lengthen the stems so they hooked and linked without needing to get his hands messy with the work. Small blue forget-me-nots were added when he tore up one of his sheets of paper, but if he started making laurels Arthur would be obligated to set the display on fire. "Is football."

"Oh..." Arthur hadn't thought about that.

As soon as Italy said it he immediately caught the imaginary scent of green grass freshly trimmed before a match, his school shoes feeling loose and clunky where his feet were propped up under their desk, imagining the tightness of proper cleats and the light feeling of a jersey instead of heavy sweaters and robes.
"You know, I tried teaching Scorpius a bit of it over summer."

"How do wizards not have football?" Italy sighed his way through the rhetorical question,

"Because they have quidditch." And there was nothing more infuriating for a pureblood wizard with a love of the game than introducing him to a sport where magic had nothing to do with things. In football one either had to run and kick or collapse and try to breathe. "We had to use a quaffle though, terrible things to kick around."

"How do you headbutt a quaffle?"

"Very painfully."

"You two seem very chatty today." Arthur looked up to see Professor Parkinson standing directly over their desk.

The severe witch who taught Transfiguration was a tad too strict on students from other houses, but that didn't give Slytherin much leeway either. Now her hands were folded together in front of her and her scowl was for Arthur. Her black hair was braided tightly behind her head and made her face look quite thin. Her bangs hung straight down to frame her pale face. The worst part was that she behaved so severely towards Arthur because of his chattering, but then turned a wonderfully sweet smile on Italy.

Kirkland had not been a small name during the Wizarding War that had dominated the previous generation, and they had only been on one side of the conflict. Vargas on the other hand was nearly unknown in Britain. And he was Slytherin. And he was good at her class.

"Splendid work, Mister Vargas: five points for Slytherin. You have such a delicate, and yet powerful grasp of this art."

"Ah, thank you, Professor! I just love watching you work." He was also a kiss-ass but Arthur refused to let that factor into things. "What flower do you recommend I try next? Daisies are maybe too easy for me." Brown-noser.

"Well, it seems Mister Kirkland is attempting to form a rose, why don't you help him?"

Arthur waited for the Professor to turn her back before giving Italy a look that said if he tried to offer help, Arthur would offer him a black eye.

By the end of the lesson Arthur handed in six healthy red and white roses, Scorpius, Gamp and Higgs all completed the required number of petals and stems to pass the unit, and Italy was a grotesque over-achiever who handed in a rainbow crown of daisies, a chain of forget-me-nots, and three roses - green, red and white, before Arthur cuffed him in the back of the head and told him to stop being such a show-off.

"You only do so well in that class to make the Ravenclaws shut up in History." Scorpius and Higgs vanished right at the end of Transfiguration, and as it was the last class before Astronomy later that night, there was no reason to rush ahead.

"You sound jealous, Kirkland." But Italy didn't deny it either which meant Arthur was probably right. To be perfectly honest though, it was a solid plan.

"What I am is anxious," He mentioned instead, looking off in the direction the two other Slytherin boys had vanished. "I don't think I like having those two run off."
"Scorpius heard something from his father, that's why." Gamp's voice to his left almost made Arthur jump.

Eliza Gamp, when she wasn't crying, was the sort of girl who would remain utterly silent until something abruptly prompted her to speak. Arthur couldn't comment on her appearance beyond the fact that she seemed a healthy twelve year old girl, a little tall and with thick black hair quite like Professor Parkinson, but she always seemed like she was trying just a little bit too hard to appear unfazed and disinterested. Her chin was almost constantly up in the air, which made her crying fits even more remarkable.

There was a vine of tiny, delicate blue forget-me-nots in her hand and Arthur turned an accusing eye on Italy, who balked.

"I just- I copied him." Gamp almost seemed ashamed for interrupting the stare-off, but Arthur was happier hearing that than being led to understand that Italy was flirting with children.

If he dared go around breaking British girls' hearts, Arthur would hoist him up by his thumbs.

"Did you want to practice with us, Eliza?" Italy made the offer and Arthur didn't mind it. She didn't seem like the type to spend most of her time with the other girls, they either thought she cried too much or whatever their interests were just didn't match up. Gamp was usually either hovering on the edge of their discussions with Scorpius, or up in the owlery with her snowy white pet.

The way she smiled but then tried very hard not to smile was a concise yes, her arms tightening around her books so she nearly crushed her flowers, walking abreast with the two of them until Arthur found that awkward and shuffled over so she took the middle spot.

"Scorpius did seem distracted, was it about quidditch?" It was literally the only thing on that boy's mind anymore, he was waiting for the try-out date with baited breath. Feliciano and Arthur didn't make a bee-line for the Slytherin dorm because they knew he was liable to pop up at any moment and drag them to the pitch to help him practice.

"No," Gamp answered, shaking her head and looking uncomfortable walking between them, but the nations didn't relent because they both wanted to hear her soft voice. "He came in looking frightened again, and since Higgs was in such a bad mood they immediately started talking. What did you two do to Higgs anyways? He was so, so upset when he showed up."

"Ah, we need to apologize to him."

"No we don't." Arthur denied. "We stopped him from beating up a first year Hufflepuff. I don't really care what Finnigan said, unless it was particularly nasty, but you just don't go assaulting younger students." Arthur knew that from first-hand experience last year, and he simply wasn't up to watch anyone else take the offensive position this time, especially not from Slytherin.

"Alright, then we need to talk to him." Eliza reworded his statement and Arthur didn't see the need to challenge him that time.

"Well you're about to get your way." Eliza came to a sudden stop and the two of them carried on another step before catching themselves. Nervous Gamp just nodded ahead down the hall. "Here they come."

And they were coming quickly. Scorpius and Higgs were charging up the corridor towards them, wands out. There was terror on the smaller boy's thin face while Higgs looked like a trapped animal when he saw Arthur and Italy blocking his way. Obviously he hadn't moved past that morning, but
Scorpius didn't care at all as he grabbed Arthur and Italy by the sleeves and started spitting out words.

"You- you've got to come! Oh my god, it's awful!"

"What?"

"Don't ask just hurry!" Scorpius started pulling and Arthur gave in, looking back just in time to watch Italy snag Gamp by the unwilling hand and drag her along with them. Higgs had his bottom lip between his teeth and he didn't say a word, just grunted and swung a hand for them to follow him and Scorpius through a stone doorway and up a flight of stairs.

The brisk pace turned into a jog, the halls emptying as students either went to class or drifted to their dormitories, until finally the five of them were at a flat run through the hall and up the shifting staircases to the fourth floor.

"There was this awful scream-" Higgs panted, keeping pace better than Gamp who stopped to flick her books with her wand so that followed and flew behind her.

"It came from the walls- we were just going up to take the short-cut down to the dungeons when we heard it!" Screaming from the fourth floor? But that brought them right near the infirmary so maybe-

"Just come on!"

They ran until they passed the infirmary's white doors and then Scorpius and Higgs began to slow, eyes watching the walls and jumping over the portrait frames. For once, none of the characters painted on the enchanted canvas sheets were present, every ornate frame vacant and backgrounds left with flickering candles or boiling cauldrons with no one to attend them.

"She was right along this wall, one of these..."

"Wait, you mean a painting screamed?" Arthur asked.

"Worse than that." Higgs answered, watching Scorpius search until Gamp gasped and they all walked right into each other.

"What are all of you doing up here?"

All of this outside the infirmary and none of them had thought that maybe, just maybe, if Scorpius Malfoy had heard a terrible screaming, then his father Professor Malfoy had as well. He was also far more qualified to deal with it. The five of them were left standing there when the School Healer and their head of house turned on them with the question in the middle of the hall. The Professor was standing there in his typical white work robes and green underlayer as the second years each started groping for answers.

"Broomsticks-"

"-and flowers, we-"

"-were going down the passage."

"We want to go down the passage to get to the dormitory." It was a sticky mess of replies and Arthur and Italy both let the children speak for them. Gamp put the cleanest story together but the nations weren't even sure if they'd done enough wrong to warrant giving false answers. Professor Malfoy didn't seem critical either, but behind him between the glass windows was a great big bare patch of
stone wall, a few smears of dirt on the massive yellow bricks showing where something had been previously hanging. Whatever Higgs and Scorpius had wanted to show them, the staff had already removed it.

"You've gone about half a hallway past the passage entrance then. Mister Vargas, I expect you to keep better track of these Hogwarts Secrets when you're shown them." Because Italy was the only one who'd been kept long enough in the infirmary to require Professor Malfoy show him the fastest way back down to the dungeons, with the added bonus of having to avoid their flying instructor last year. "Off with you now, there's nothing to see up here."

"Yes, Professor." Scorpius was the first one to turn around and he wore a sickly mixture of red and green on his face the entire way back down the hall. When they reached a cracked stone in the wall, Italy pulled out his wand to tap three times and open up a steep stone slide meant to carry them down through the castle at lightning speeds. It was a little bit terrifying and really only worked the one way: if you were coming up from the dungeon then you either had to fly or get ready for a very long flight of stairs.

Higgs and Scorpius used the ride down to gather their thoughts and, in Scorpius's case, composure. It took until the five of them were sitting down around one of the common room's low tables to wait for their astronomy lesson that Scorpius was finally able to explain.

"Somebody cut her up." He stated, voice haunted. "I've never heard of vandalism like it, but somebody took scissors or a knife to the portrait of the flower girl hanging between those windows and slashed it to bits. Higgs and I saw her screaming in the shreds before we tore off to get away from the sound.

"Worst thing I've ever seen." Higgs agreed, and Arthur glanced up to see Charles' older brother leaning back in a chair and shooting curious glances their way: seventh years were always wary of younger students whispering. "I didn't know the people in pictures could bleed." Arthur... had heard of that, but only very rarely. "I'll think twice before I ever go cutting pictures out of the Prophet again..."

So it was, in the end, a sobering way to wrap up their September.

And it set the tone for what was to come.
The flower girl near the infirmary was only the first painting to be removed that semester. By the time October was nearly over, three more had been taken down off various walls around the school. Understandably, it became harder and harder to see or to speak with the characters in the rest of the frames.

The painted subjects now lingered off in the backgrounds. Nymphs vanished behind blurred trees and wizen old wizards found excuses to walk quickly from frame to frame and find blurred out doors or convenient nooks behind bookshelves to hide from questions.

Quidditch try-outs came roaring up with such enthusiasm from Scorpius that Feliciano had learned to just happily accept the daily reminders of when and how the trials would begin. It meant he couldn't spend another Saturday prowling the halls looking for any painting that would be willing to talk to him: a strange thing after last year when just his touch on enchanted canvas had brought several art pieces happily over for a chat.

Sitting in the cold wind with his green gloves and Slytherin scarf wrapped around his neck and face, Feliciano tried to clap and yell along with England and Gamp in the Slytherin quidditch stands. The seventy-foot tall pillars of wood and stone were propped up by barely enough magic to get either nation up here on a good day. They'd gone to all six Quidditch matches last year either to cheer on their house's team or because Scorpius had put on a pleading look that they hadn't understood yet.

Now they understood. Scorpius Malfoy's most desperate wish was to play on the Slytherin Quidditch team like his father before him, and he was willing to go head-to-head against students from every other year to get it.

Seven players, four balls, a few hundred different rules about not hurting or harming or anything- ing the Seeker, and that was Quidditch. Feliciano wanted to cheer, but he just wrapped his arms a little tighter around the glass jar Gamp had given him. Inside was a bright green flame crackling just hard enough that the heat bled through his clothes.

"You're pathetic, it's not even that cold out yet." England scolded, looking away from where the Slytherin hopefuls were hovering in the air in front of team captain Thomas Higgs. From second year, both Scorpius and Charles Higgs were poised on their broomsticks listening to him talk and flutter back and forth. Relays, drills, skill challenges: a whole afternoon of practice flying in the nippy air while friends were forced to sit and freeze.

"It's damp so j-just-" Feliciano had winters, he had cold ones and snowy ones and he liked going further north beyond his territories to visit friends. But when he was visiting he was usually walking around, or skiing, or hiking, or safe inside cooking up heavy warm meals and keeping fires roaring for the light and ambience as much as the heat!

He was never, ever, just sitting on a wet bench in the half-rain of a Scottish autumn. His clothes were misted with the cold water that got in his hair, under his arms, behind his knees, over his thighs: everywhere. He was freezing cold and as thankful as he was for the fire, he just kept scooting closer to the friends sitting on either side of him.

Sadly, Gamp didn't seem to like it when he did that and kept moving down the bench, so Feliciano had to tempt England's bad mood by scooting up against him instead and getting disgusted looks for it from the other nation.
Honestly.

"It's cold, okay, cold."

At least England was just whiny, not actually mean, and he just put up with Feliciano trying to sponge warmth off him. Colder nations always had that envious trait of being warmer during the winter months than normal, their people keeping cozy and heated in a way that kept their skin soft and warm instead of seizing up with callouses from the icy winds. It was part of what made Germany so fun to hug all the time, not only was he so big, but warm too whenever a German winter came down and settled over his shoulders.

But Germany wasn't here, England was, and Feliciano was bold enough to just claim the other nation's arm to hold close like the jar. He got away with it until the heat of the flame made England too uncomfortable to stay like that. An elbow in the gut made him let go while he was scolded, and then they both looked up at the sound of a harsh captain's whistle.

To be a Seeker, you had to be smaller, lighter, and more manoeuvrable on your broom than the other players. Higgs wasn't trying to get the seeker position, he didn't want it: he'd been practising to take over as a beater but had admitted that he probably wouldn't make the team until next year. He was holding a beater's club in his hand now and another whistle sent the second year diving down on his broom after a bludger, swatting and knocking the screaming ball back at another student set up fifty yards away. They were defending a set of quaffles wearing Slytherin Quidditch robes, pairs of applicants trying to beat bludgers past their partner's defences.

England and Gamp were talking over Feliciano's head about the sport when he woke up two hours later, neck kinked where he'd fallen asleep on England's shoulder. They were now sitting in straight pouring rain, the wind making a joke of the high awning that had been drawn over the stands to keep the audience dry. Most of the other Slytherins had retreated with the poor weather, but since England wasn't getting up Feliciano just closed his eyes again to keep away the cold rain spitting him in the face, trying to get back to warm dreams about winter chalets and dark liqueurs over fine food and, ah, everything his winter vacation had better be this year.

"You're still here?" But he looked up again at a familiar voice, eyes squinting through the rain at two hovering shadows of green-grey floating beyond the edge of the stands, rain soaking their robes and little boys' legs dangling from over the edges of broomsticks. How they could rest all their weight like that without hurting themselves was something the completely adult side of Feliciano's brain couldn't cope with. He closed his eyes one more time without answering until England rudely shook him off.

"We said we'd watch the whole thing!" The other nation declared in a snooty tone, Feliciano blinking the sleep away properly now. He whined when the wind hit his gut and blew his robes open before he could seize them shut again. "This big baby fell asleep, but Gamp and I paid attention."

"Fuck you..." Feliciano muttered, dropping the words in Italian under his breath as he rubbed his face with his soaking wet gloves, irritated again by the cold drips that started down his nose thanks to the water soaking him completely. Stomping his feet just got the water settled on his legs to soak down against his skin-! "That's it! I'm going back to the dorms!" At least it was warm in the dungeon!

"Wait for us, you ninny," Scorpius laughed, hanging in the air still and water pouring off the ends of his Quidditch robes. "Or we can just fly you back to the castle."

"I'm not getting on that thing and you can't make me do it."

"I still don't get why you didn't try out with us." Higgs spoke up this time. There'd been a really hard
few hours on that day when they'd stopped him from beating up the Finnigan brother, but a few attempts to talk about it had finally made Higgs apologize for losing his temper with *a simple low-blood*. Feliciano hadn't liked the way Higgs and the others made it a blood and nobility issue instead of just not being a jerk, but if it worked, it worked. "You're a better flyer than me by a mile."

"No." He refused to go along with their idea of *fun* too.

"He can barely *sit* in the rain, what makes you think he can fly through it?" England laughed, Feliciano aiming a punch at his arm that he regretted when it made a trickle of ice cold Scottish rain go down his spine.

"It's cold! *It's cold!* It's too cold- why are we still sitting out here!"

They laughed and snickered at his complaints until they reached the Slytherin dorms again, the boys hurrying down their staircase for a hot shower and fresh clothes to get rid of the cold. Feliciano went in knowing he'd take the longest because England barely washed his face and hands with hot water before leaving to change his robes. There was a formal letter for France’s President waiting for him in the common room.

Scorpius and Higgs were muddy as well as wet, so they took proper showers behind the half walls of the Slytherin bathroom. Each little cubicle of green tile sported a silver shower nozzle and simple dials like what they’d find in any communal bath house, but Feliciano wasn't satisfied just pounding his back with hot water from the school's walls. While the two boys talked about the sport with no sign of changing the subject, Feliciano switched from the showers over to one of the low pools of hot, steaming water.

If there was one thing Feliciano had to give Hogwarts, it was credit for its bath systems. He wasn't sure how regularly teenage boys could be convinced to soak in hot water and soap on their own, but the nation sank up to his skinny shoulders in the green tinted bath and felt the heat soak right through his skin to get at his frozen insides. The water smelled like a cross between light green tea and the brush of rosemary and cool sage that teased the nose and kept him from falling asleep.

Well, that and the stubborn chill of the silver cross around his neck, the talisman resting hard and heavy over his ribs despite the hot water. It was uncomfortable to wear it when he just wanted to roll up in warmth and relax…

"Vargas!" He didn't expect boys to understand about the bath. They wanted to wash up as fast as possible so they could go and enjoy the rest of their Saturday with games and avoiding homework.

"Vargas are you still washing up?" Scorpius appeared with his shorts and pants already on again, a towelled hand going through his blonde hair and bare feet smattering on the damp tiles.

"I told you, it's too cold out there!" Feliciano argued, sinking a little deeper in the bath showing he wasn't ready to get out yet.

"Why're you still wearing that funny thing in the bath?"

"This?" He brought the cross up out of the bath, water dripping off the crystals as they refracted the green light back across the bath's rippled surface. "I always have it on."

"That's what I meant: won't the water do things to it?"

"Nope! There's a charm in place to protect it!"

"What's so special about it?" Scorpius wandered away while asking the question, probably to give
him privacy again even though Feliciano didn't mind at all. Even if the tint to the water didn't hide him, there was nothing to be ashamed about with other boys around. "You aren't always wearing it, are you?"

"It was a gift." He answered innocently, ignoring the second half of the question. "And religion's still really important to my people." It was embedded in his culture, so even if the Italian Wizarding communities had a different way about it than the Muggles, Chistendom still had enough sway that a mother had given her daughter a silver cross to remind her of home while studying abroad. That Feliciano had taken it in the fall-out of that child's death was just another potent symbol engraved on an artefact of struggle.

The questions stopped after that and the boys, hungry from their practice, said goodbye to him so they could go to the great hall and see what snacks were available for sneaking before dinner.

Feliciano lingered in the hot water, repeatedly closing his hand around the cross and its cold chain trying to tell himself he could definitely slip it off for a few minutes and get away from the icy feeling. Even when he slept, he could only ever heat it up with blankets and his own skin until it was sort of warm, never hot or even comfortable enough to just sink into his chest and go away for a few hours of sleep. He could handle the smaller limbs and higher voice, even the face that still surprised him in mirrors and the strength that gave out when he least expected. It was the cold that made him reluctant to put the charm back on whenever breaks ended and he sent himself back to this place.

Turning it over in his hands, he'd learned more about it over the last year and a half. There were six princess-cut crystals that followed the straight back of the cross and the four smaller squares embedded along the cross piece. A round opal was set in the centre, its white surface glittering and swirling sometimes like smoke trapped in glass. There was no Latin or Italian engraved into it, just the uneven back where a nervous thumb and fingers had worn the silver down with unanswered prayers.

His hand was cold when he let it fall back into the water, silently pleased that instead of falling almost to his stomach the cross rested against his ribs now. It was still too low to go hoisting out of his shirt, but the new length made it less of a bother.

Finally finishing up, Feliciano was happy to go upstairs to a blanket and his cat curled up on one of the couches. Gino woke up from his nap to meow happily and paw into Feliciano's lap as the nation sat down and rubbed his pet's soft ears. At four centuries old, the feline was happy to just boop his nose with its own and nuzzle its face under his chin. The children talked of wizarding sports and England was lost to the world with his letter writing and fact-checking in the corner.

So it was a quiet, relaxing Saturday evening, and after dinner it turned into a soft night of darkness in the Slytherin dorms. Warmth and peace and contented children who slept soundly in their beds.

Until they heard the scream.

Just one scream, blood-curdling and terrifying. Feminine and lingering, it clawed through the black air and Feliciano felt himself wake up choking on emotions that weren't his, smothered with fear that didn't belong to him as the boy's dormitory lights flared brighter than he'd ever seen around the four beds. Higgs, England and Scorpius were all sitting straight up in bed, horror and blanket confusion covering their faces, the silence swallowing the signs of sharp pants under baggy nightshirts and pale hands grasping at bedsheets looking for wands.

The nations shared a look and Feliciano knew whatever he'd just felt, England was still choking on it. They were out of bed at once and the two boys panicked as soon as England pulled the sheets back.
"Don't you dare!"

"You stay in bed don't you even think about leaving!" Feliciano ignored Higgs, shaking and fumbling with his own legs, stomach jumping telling him to do exactly what Scorpius wanted, but England was already taking the stuffing out of the smaller boy.

"Are you deaf? That sound came from the girl's dorms, I'm going up to the common room to find out what happened!" Feliciano didn't want to go quite that far, but he also really didn't want to stay curled up in bed where whatever it was could eat him. If England was leaving then he didn't want to be stuck with only two twelve year old boys for protection!

"Are you daft?" Scorpius bit back. "The girl's dorms are a stone wall and washroom away from us and we heard it clear as day!"

"Yes we did, so how loud do you think the girls heard it?" Hearing his own words made it easier to get out of bed and throw the school robe on the foot of his bed up over his shoulders, looking for his wand case and sliding the black rod into it up the sleeve. Gino was standing alert at the end of the bed where the pet had been woken up, whiskers out and brown ears twitching looking for more sounds, no tail to fluff up but plenty of white poof down its back showing the animal was as tense as he was.

"Surprised we haven't heard Gamp crying yet then." Higgs sounded like he hated himself a little bit for bringing that up. As much as the bigger child didn't want to, he started rolling his blankets down and shuffling very slowly out of bed.

Scorpius, outvoted, was fast to join them. As soon as they opened their door they saw a sleepy fourth year boy hanging out in the door to his own dormitory, a few quiet voices from the fifth and sixth years before a familiar voice was heard giving a scolding behind the first year dorm door.

"And that's enough!" Head Boy Zabini was chastising, too busy dealing with three terrified little boys to notice the second years creeping past the door. "You're Slytherins so you'd better act like it! You live in the dungeons for goodness' sake: generations of Slytherins sleeping right in line with the Basilisk's chamber and no one ever- no, don't take it like... someone get him a tissue!"

Up in the common room itself all the lights were blazing, some sort of silent alarm probably going off since it looked like every Slytherin girl had come straight out of the dorms in their nightgowns and housecoats, slippers and house robes trodding over each other as the Head Girl was going around with two female Prefects to make sure tears were given tissues and pairs of boy and girlfriends weren't able to sneak too far from the rest of the group.

Feliciano turned around just as they were entering the common room to get a look at England, whose face went extremely pale right before flushing up and his green eyes started flashing around the room. The fear was heavy in the air, most of it sleepy and confused, more shocked than reacting to immediate danger. If England hadn't been right in the middle of it, he probably wouldn't have noticed there was anything wrong, but he was here, and the problem was very real to him.

The only girl they had the right to go up and talk to was Eliza Gamp, who was suspiciously hard to find. She was in their year and she spent more time with them than the other girls anyways. Feliciano could tell how angry England was when they found her down just beyond the gender-lock charm in the girl's stairwell, knees up to her face, shaking so hard she seemed about ready to come apart. She'd taken out her braid and her hair was in straggled locks down the back of her white nightgown, green school robes flung over the white cotton gown and not resting quite right around her.

"Ellie?"
"Gamp! Gamp, look up here will you?"

"Ellie c'mon, this isn't the time!"

England didn't say anything trying to get her to move, Feliciano was busy turning around looking for another girl, one of the older ones maybe, to come and help them. When England crouched down and pushed Scorpius aside, his voice fell in a way that made the babble and anxiety of the common room fade a little.

"Eliza, please." Soft and smooth, England put enough strength in his words so there was enough substance behind the sounds for her to lean on. "Just be strong for a few more minutes." Because to say she wasn't strong would just hurt her even more.

Hearing her nation speak to her like that got a reaction out of her, even if it wasn't what the boys wanted. She pulled her arms up over her head, shaking it back and forth a few times to deny England as she sniffed and gasped hard between her knees. It was hard to watch.

"Just leave her," one of the other Slytherin second year girls came up, a particularly mean look on her sleepy face. "Nothing happened to us, it was the seventh year girls who woke everyone up."

"Can you just help bring her up here?" Scorpius asked, only to tighten up visibly across the shoulders when their blonde classmate just turned her nose up in the air and sniffed harshly.

"The half-blood isn't my problem."

England jumped to his feet and tried to push past Feliciano. He almost moved out of the way but felt the heat that flashed through the blonde's skin and immediately hooked an arm under England's shoulder, swinging his weight around to catch the other one in a fast hold. When England fought back with him, Higgs noticed the scuffle and barked at his nation to stop acting like a dog.

"I don't like it either, but cut it out!" Feliciano was proud to hear Higgs take that tone of voice, but winced at what came after. "Now who isn't acting like a pureblood, Kirkland?"

"I'm half!" England hissed, and Feliciano very nearly dropped them both on the floor. They hadn't talked about blood status at all and he just-!

Scorpius and Higgs both jumped at the comment, looking at England like he'd just grown a new head. If they had an opinion beyond that, it was crushed by the sudden wash of magic over the common room and the rain of sparks that fell over the girls' stairwell.

The gender charm winked out at once, and then Professor Malfoy was sweeping over the four of them with nothing but a frigid glance at Feliciano that made him drop England like he'd been burned.

Professor Malfoy noticed Gamp too, but he moved wordlessly down the stairs and was followed immediately by the Head Girl. Feliciano knew he shouldn't but he fell in step behind the two prefects who followed. He got away with it by timing his jump with Scorpius darting down the stairs to reach Gamp, and the complete distraction washing over the older Slytherins and head of house as they moved.

The girl's dorms looked the same as the boys, just inverted for architecture's sake. All seven doors were wide open and it was the first one on the left that the girls and Professor Malfoy swept into, Feliciano stopping and hanging just at the corner so he could peer inside and try to hear what they said.

"Who did this?"
"None of us, Professor, I swear!"

Professor Malfoy rounded on the Head Girl, wand out, and tapped her between the eyes with the tip.

"Tell the truth!" He barked, evoking the truth charm that came with Prefect and Head student privileges.

"I swear on my honour as Head Girl, no other girls from Slytherin House were in the seventh year dorm when this happened, and all four of us were in bed and woke up at the same time with the scream!"

"There are five seventh year Slytherin girls, Miss Lovecraft." And the Head Girl squirmed hard under her charm when he pointed that out, but then bowed to the compulsion and answered:

"Margaret was not in bed at the time, sir."

"And where was Miss Margaret Adams?"

"Not... in the dormitory, sir."

It sounded like someone was sneaking out. Given the uncomfortable squirm that hit the Prefects behind Miss Lovecraft, it probably had something to do with dating and being seventeen in a school fraught with secret passages and segregated dormitories.

As much as Feliciano loved to gossip, his attention waned from the interrogation to look at what had caused all the trouble for them. There was a thick picture frame on the wall, its canvas ripped and torn open. A bit of blue sky was stained black by the tears, the paint crumbled and chipping away where it was dusting the floor after the assault. There was movement somewhere in the shreds, but it was faint and it felt painful, the air around the frame resonating with hurt and pain and fear that was probably the reason the entire house had woken up so suddenly.

"Ten points from Slytherin for failing to keep your peers in order, Miss Lovecraft, and an additional five if Miss Adams doesn't have an impressive tale to tell me when I find her."

Feliciano wanted a better look at the portrait, he wanted to see the frame and touch the rips and tears in the enchanted canvas. Part of it was his own experience with painting and art, but the rest... This made at least four acts of vandalism and yet not one student had come as close as he was right now to seeing the damage.

"Something like this happening in the dormitories... Who saw the Bloody Baron tonight?" Professor Malfoy's question was met with confused silence.

"No... No one, sir?" Head Girl Lovecraft stated softly. "Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time I saw him around Slytherin house at all."

"Or in the halls." One of the Prefects spoke up, a stocky fifth year girl who looked just confused by the question. Feliciano wasn't sure who the Bloody Baron was, but he remembered England mentioning him before and knew he could just ask him later.

Or now, because he really didn't feel like getting caught while eavesdropping like this.

Hurrying back up the stairs to his friends, the other second years had succeeded in getting Gamp out of the stairwell and into a chair in the common room. Higgs was yawning and falling asleep since nothing exciting was happening anymore, and Scorpius had his arms folded harshly and a puzzled look on his face. Someone had summoned hot chocolate from the kitchens and Gamp was being
settled with a cup of that, eyes red and swollen from crying where she didn't seem to be answering any of England or Scorpius' questions. She was just tired, and Feliciano got a suspicious stare from Scorpius when he reappeared.

"Where did you go off to?"

"Where do you think?" He answered cryptically, leaving Scorpius with a bothered face before looking at England.

The other nation didn't ask what he'd seen or make a fuss about Feliciano sneaking off, he just went back to making sure Gamp drank down the sweet drink in her mug and told Higgs to just go back to bed if he was so tired.

Once Higgs agreed and wandered off with a few more of the boys, some of the girls went down to their own beds before Professor Malfoy reappeared and told the seventh year girls to remain upstairs in the common room. The look he gave the cluster of second years told them to get out and go back to bed.

It meant leaving Gamp behind with her cocoa because they couldn't just take her down to the boy’s dormitory, and the silent march back down to their shared room was stifling.

England kept trying to catch Feliciano's eye as they meandered past taller students and slipped back through their door, the lights inside dimmed back down to normal levels now that the Professor was present and was working to calm everything and everyone so they could get back to sleep. Tomorrow was Sunday, but that didn't mean staying up all night was encouraged by the school.

Feliciano laid in bed with the cold weight of his cross digging into his chest again, arms wrapped up in blankets and his pet curled up quietly next to him without the usual lull of a content purr to help him nod off.

Even if he wouldn't have another chance to see the paintings tomorrow, at least he could always ask about the Baron…

When Italy began asking questions about the Bloody Baron, Arthur found himself wrapped up in a brand new mystery. Where was the Slytherin house ghost?

One wouldn’t expect such things to matter overmuch in an investigation into suicides, but that wasn’t the case with Hogwart's. Among the rank and file souls floating through walls and startling lessons were the four house ghosts, and these spirits had earned a touch of responsibility to, forgive the phrase, liven things up a little. The house ghost was the protector of its students; an advocate for their behaviour, and a positively devilish arbiter over their wrong-doings.

Of course, what the Fat Friar of Hufflepuff deemed appropriate and what Nearly Headless Nick of Gryffindor found scandalous could easily overlap. Wizards were not wont to use common standards or reasoning, let alone the dead ones.

Arthur hadn't noticed it until Halloween rolled around, but the older students had been wondering about their missing guardian for weeks already. The Bloody Baron hadn't been spotted once this year, not even high up on the Astronomy tower which was supposed to be his favourite place to rattle his chains and moan.

"Maybe he's just extra moody this year. Bit of a shame for the rest of us though." The Baron was supposed to be summonable if you rattled a small length of chain hanging from the Slytherin fireplace. Every few hours throughout October you could hear someone rattling it, shaking it,
whipping it back and forth so hard one of the Prefects gave a scolding for almost breaking it. But he never appeared.

Scorpius got his hands on a silk handkerchief from somewhere, a silver sickle wrapped inside and the second years left that in a folded square up in the Astronomy tower before one of their lessons one night to tempt his favour. No luck.

What on earth could scare away a scary ghost?

"Halloween time, Kirkland. He'll show up at the feast for sure!"

But he didn't.

Pumpkin juice and floating jack-o-lanterns, jinxed hats that screamed when worn and books that started snapping at careless fingers. Halloween was always a fun time at Hogwarts and this year was no different. Yet, while Nearly Headless Nick, the Fat Friar and the Grey Lady all made very brief appearances, the Bloody Baron did not.

The issue of ghosts and hauntings was distracted by the first Slytherin Quidditch match of the year. Scorpius actually came quite close to losing his nerve completely on the morning of the match in mid-November, and it came down to Arthur and Higgs dragging him out of bed and forcing a sweater over his pajamas while Italy was uselessly laughing and making jokes about 'how bad could it be?'

"You wanted this." Arthur scolded, getting mint paste on a toothbrush that was either Scorpius' or Higgs', and firmly shoving the bristled head in Scorpius' mouth when he opened up to protest.

"The worst that'll happen is you fall off your broom and we lose the match completely." Italy had the right idea to help encourage the other boy along, and Higgs was strapping the wrong guard to Scorpius' wrist over his backwards shirt.

"And then Gryffindor will laugh at us from now until Christmas." Arthur agreed, pointing Italy in the direction of Scorpius' wardrobe so the other nation could begin poking around for his Quidditch robe. "And it will all be your fault."

"Stop it!!"

It took Thomas Higgs pounding on the dorm door and putting the fear of God into Scorpius to settle the matter completely. He got his own teeth brushed, clothes changed, and gear strapped on before Slytherin's new Seeker fled the house. And of course-

"Your broom!"

Italy had to fly it down while the rest of the house sat quietly in the common room waiting for the call to go down to the Quidditch stadium. The atmosphere was tense, but not frantic: someone passed around self-waving streamers of green and silver, and when Italy came back after delivering the broom Arthur got him with his wand again and painted the house colours across his head.

Italy was less than enthused about this, but for the sake of house pride he didn't kick up a fuss.

It was Higgs who kicked Arthur when it turned out that someone had put a red and gold lion on the back of his robes. Arthur was very nearly stampeded out of the house and had to tear his class robe off and jump on it before Italy stopped laughing so hard, and one of the prefects blasted the hateful lion away.
Obviously, they were playing against Gryffindor house. They marched together as seven years in a group, intent on walking in unison and creating an entrance as they flowed out of the castle and across the wet green grass to the Quidditch pitch. The enchanted steps of the green and silver Slytherin observation tower were easier than seventy feet of straight climb should have been, even for short first- and second-year legs, and there were plenty of hard wet wooden seats waiting for them when they got there.

Directly across the pitch from Slytherin stood Gryffindor's red and gold tower, the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws taking up the east and west positions around the oval field and sand banks under the quaffle hoops.

The weather held up, the sun beating off the cold November clouds and the mountain whistling with wind that could make quite an impact on a flying sport.

"What happens if he does crash?" Italy asked from beside him, his hair such a shock in the sunlight with its green and silver streaks that Arthur jumped every single time he turned around to look at him. If it wouldn't have been unsportsmanlike, he would have undone the jinx just to spare himself the sight of it.

"Well, his father's the School Healer so I imagine he'd be fine."

"That's good."

"Unless he dies instantly."

"What-!?"

"And now, welcome to the first Quidditch Match of the school year! Introducing the Gryffindor team! The captain this year is-"

It didn't matter who the captain was, the stadium exploded with noise as a curtain in the Gryffindor tower fell away and out came a series of red and gold blurs. The seven Gryffindor players shot into the sunlight and flew in a sharp V-formation as the names were rambled off with positions, the beaters and keeper and chasers and, finally, the seeker.

The last two names were the most worthwhile, because first came the name "Albus Potter" for one of the Chaser positions, then "James" for the seeker.

Oh dear...

"Facing off against House Cup Champion Gryffindor today, get ready- Team Slytherin!"

It didn't matter that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff didn't cheer this time. It didn't matter that Gryffindor's stands made low, threatening noises. It didn't matter a damned bit, because every member of Slytherin house stood up when the roar of seven racing brooms rocketed out of their tower. They stood and they yelled and they cheered, stomping their feet in time with a house chant no one could really hear properly.

Both teams circled and dove around each other, warm-up drills and the distant drift of captains' voices. Thomas Higgs was like a vulture circling high over his team, streaks of white down the arms of his robes marking him as the captain, a tall boy on another broom in red and gold robes bearing the same stripes and joining his team's laps around the stadium. With a hard whistle from the ground, all fourteen flyers came down to hover in position, Scorpius and James Potter higher over the line of players and both keepers hanging back closer to the goal-posts.
It was good that Scorpius didn't look over at the stands to search for them; he seemed completely focused on whatever Professor Desford was saying on the ground. Thomas Higgs and the Gryffindor Captain both landed and shook hands, which was a nicer way of saying they charged each other and then tried to snap the other boy's wrists in a grapple, then mounted their brooms and took off again to hover and wait for the release.

The snitch went first, and Arthur felt himself leaning hard on the wooden rail in front of him watching Scorpius and James Potter both struggle to keep their eyes on the flittering gold ball before it zipped away and vanished.

"On my whistle-!"

The quaffle was in the professor's hands, Desford's checkered black and white robes fluttering in the wind. Please let the weather hold.

Up went the quaffle and a kick set the bludgers loose, Desford's whistle screamed between her lips before either attacking ball was past her knees.

The game was on.

Higgs' brother had every right to be team captain, because it was a Gryffindor chaser who took the bright red quaffle with its hard ridges first, and the Slytherin Captain zipped straight past her and knocked it out of her hands from below, not even holding it as his arm lobbed the ball straight up and back over his head into the hands of a fifth year Arthur didn't know.

But a bludger knocked that girl sideways so hard she only kept her broom by hooking her knees over the shaft and spinning wildly trying not to fall.

It was an absolutely vicious battle for the quaffle and the measly ten points to get it through any of the raised hoops, and after five minutes with only commentary from the teachers' stands, Arthur and Italy both started looking for the snitch.

"Potter's in a dive!" And Scorpius was half-way across the other side of the field. He broke into his own panicked spiral to go after whatever James Potter had seen.

"He's faking!" Arthur jumped when he heard Italy shout beside him, he looked and saw Italy pointing at the Hufflepuff benches, a flash of gold hitting the light before it struck off in another direction.

He turned right around and scruffed Italy from the back.

"You can see the bloody thing from here and you didn't join the damned team!?!"

But Potter's dive was a fake, which was confusing because the younger Potter had the quaffle under his arm and was screaming through the air past the Ravenclaw benches. A wild bludger came out of nowhere past Slytherin and their classmates let out a roar before the Slytherin Keeper was trapped between an attempt to score and the very real danger of being beaten in the head with the maniacal toy.

Gryffindor scored, but at least the Keeper kept his head.

The game kept going like that for the next ten minutes at least, but when the Seekers did see the snitch this time there was nothing fake about the dive James Potter performed. He was only forced to break away when a smartly hit bludger screamed towards the ground and looped back up straight at his face.
Scorpius was a blur but the snitch was almost out of sight, Potter going straight after him as the stadium stopped caring about a kick to the head over the quaffle. Scorpius' broom wavered in the air before jetting forward and looping wide around the Hufflepuff tower to chase the snitch in a spiral straight up and around it. Arthur didn't hear himself yelling until he noticed that the trembling down his arms and legs was from him beating his own hands on the rail.

The snitch broke straight up, looped once and fired directly at the Slytherin tower, it was such a long distance that there was no way it would stay on that path for long, but James Potter came out of nowhere to cannonball Scorpius from the side, a boot shoved against his broom so the smaller boy went spinning like a helicopter, weight completely thrown off at the shoulders until he pitched straight backwards off the stick.

"NO!"

"It was a joke- don't let him fall!"

His fingertips made a grab and then slipped. He dropped like a bird shoved from the nest, robes flapping and going head and shoulders first to the ground. The noise from Slytherin tower was unbearable.

Team Captain Thomas Higgs was a black blur through the air that got a hand in Scorpius' robes and twisted his broom hard in a shallow dive to keep from snapping the Seeker's neck or popping his spine. They screamed to the ground in a controlled fall before he let Scorpius drop the last four feet and the younger player tucked his arms and shoulders in just right. He fell into a roll and landed back on his feet, breaking into a run for his broom when he called it.

"Potter's done it!" But it just wasn't good enough. "James Potter's caught the snitch! A hundred and fifty points to Gryffindor, this match is over!!"

Scorpius had his eyes on the sky when he heard the announcement and the roaring from the other three houses. Potter and the Gryffindor team, including his younger brother, were performing a loud victory lap straight past the Slytherin stands, the snitch still fighting in his grip.

It... really wasn't the end of Scorpius's day that any of them had hoped for.

"Buck up, Malfoy, there's no shame in it!" What made it even worse was how, even an hour after the game was over, Scorpius simply refused to leave the dressing room. The chamber was hexed to keep non-team members out regardless of house or gender, so the four other second-years were stranded at the door trying to coax him to come out.

Arthur was getting quite fed up with enchantments taking one of the five in their circle beyond the reach of the rest. First Gamp, now Malfoy, it was ridiculous.

"I fell."

"And you landed on your feet like a proper player, now get out of there." But at least when someone else was having a moment of agony, Eliza was much firmer than normal. "If you don't stop sulking the whole house will know!"

"Tell them I'm polishing my broom."

"Except you're not polishing it."

"Too much polish is probably what got you in trouble in the first place!"
Arthur didn't settle for glaring at Italy's comment, he straight up stomped on his foot for it. Eliza's black-eyed look burnt him just as harshly.

"Don't make me go get Tom," Higgs threatened next, if that mild tone of voice was supposed to be scary. "He already gave the team a chat and he won't be happy if I make him come back here."

"You wouldn't." Scorpius's voice sulked.

"Fine, he's in the library so you lot watch this one while I go-"

"No- don't!"

They did eventually get him out of the locker room, and Higgs did end up in detention later that week for punching out one of their Hufflepuff classmates in Astronomy.

Arthur and Italy didn't get in the way to stop him, because honestly, they hadn't found a joke about pushing Scorpius off the tower to see how he'd land very funny. Circumstances being what they were, Arthur finally pulled his old Nimbus Two-Thousand-and-One out of his wardrobe where he'd stuffed it despite bringing it all the way to Hogwarts. It became a Sunday routine after rounds of homework to get themselves out into the cold and the wind and help Scorpius practice and get over the rotting weight in his gut.

Well, it became Arthur's routine to watch this, because if Italy was left on the ground then he'd whine and cry and pester whoever else was on the ground with him to lend him his scarf or a hug or a warming charm because it was too cold. Considering all four of them had broomsticks and he didn't, the complications were obvious.

"I think Vargas is really very silly sometimes." Yes, Arthur thought so too, but he also knew the same sorts of dirty tricks on a broomstick that Scorpius wasn't used to while flying with his father and grandfather at Malfoy Manor. Gamp was less willing to get her hands dirty, so more often than not she'd hover with a beater's club in her hands over Arthur while Italy took Scorpius up higher into the air and performed all kinds of nearly-illegal stunts. Higgs was forever on hand with a copy of his brother's book of Quidditch Rules and Regulations, and it was quite amusing to watch Scorpius land in the mud every few minutes after being sent right off his stick.

Scorpius' declaration of absolute frustration on these weekends was always: "That one can't be legal!", which he happened to say quite often.

"Well did he use his elbow?" And Higgs was always quick with the book to check.

"N-No..."

"Then it's legal."

There were a thousand ways to foul a Seeker in Quidditch, but between Higgs and two nations they found the one thousand and one other ways to get around the fouls. Their goal of course wasn't to teach Scorpius how to cheat since he was never the one performing the kicks and grabs back on them, but to help him learn how to fly around and avoid them.

It was the bludger fouls that almost killed the poor boy however, something Eliza demonstrated one snowy afternoon just two days before the Hogwarts Express was set to leave and take them home for Christmas. She smacked the cackling attack ball at Scorpius' broomstick handle, it collided with the head, and instead of maintaining his grip and keeping his balance as they'd all reasoned would work, the broom shot straight back out of his hands, past his legs, and he landed face-first on the ground.
He nearly broke his neck and they all got a harsh scolding from Healer Malfoy when he found out how exactly Scorpius had broken his nose (for the third time, mind you). There seemed to be a clear understanding between father and son that if he didn't stop letting his friends try and kill him, Scorpius' broom would be locked up good and tight someplace where the boy would never find it again.

It was while they were lingering in the halls after their scolding that Arthur remembered something he'd been meaning for months to go back in and ask Scorpius' father about. Scorpius' health aside, their head of house really wasn't that frightening a man to have watching over them. He was also Head of Slytherin and Arthur's question was rather innocent, not something that needed excessive delicacy.

"The Bloody Baron?" Professor Malfoy wasn't very scary because he wasn't the sort of man who could stay angry for very long. Could he hold a grudge? Possibly, but he never thought to do so with young children and their stupid ways. Sometimes all it took was a quick jump out of his line of sight to make him either completely forget or utterly bury whatever issue had made him verbally beat you into the ground ten minutes earlier. He was incredibly adept at taking issues and compartmentalizing them, it was probably what made him such a skilled healer.

So, when Arthur slunk back into the infirmary and asked his question, the tall, pale wizard pulled his lips down like a frown while letting his eyebrows hike up his forehead. A strange expression, but one of his usual ones when asked a question that was neither bothersome nor particularly important. Scorpius was sitting in utter dejection on one of the beds nearby, a quill in his hand with a bit of parchment where he was writing something down and holding a tissue to his as-of-yet unhealed nose.

"Come to think of it, I suppose the Baron hasn't been around lately has he? Peeves must be..." The professor paused, a glass vial resting on a hovering bronze tray where he'd been in the middle of combining a sweet-smelling concoction with one that reeked of onions and grass clippings. He looked up slowly with a more puzzled face this time before finding his voice again and finishing up his task.

"I don't think Peeves has been around either. Do you know him, Kirkland?"

"I know of him, sir. I haven't seen him since I arrived."

"Not ever?"

His questions didn't find answers, just a polite request to leave the infirmary and not worry himself about the issue this close to Christmas.

Understandably, Scorpius was barred from inviting friends home for winter break that year, and furthermore when they took the train home he claimed he could still taste whatever his father had made him drink to fix his nose.

"What were you writing, by the way?"

"An apology letter to my mum." Just saying it made Scorpius' face go funny before he bonelessly slid down to the compartment floor, mimicking one of Italy's usual stunts by grabbing the Italian student's robe and hiding under it at his feet. "I'm dead. Absolutely dead. I thought she'd send a howler for sure."

"It's just a bit of Quidditch practice." Higgs argued.
"Mum hates Quidditch." Oh... Well in that case then yes, Scorpius was going to die. They made a big show of talking about who would get his broomstick and his chess board next semester, and Italy started going through his bag to see if he still had that speech-to-text quill.

"You're supposed to be my friends!"

And they were, which was why Gamp started crying when they got off the train and Mrs. Malfoy was the first adult to come near their group. Arthur would have cried too if he'd been the one to break her baby's nose though, not because Mrs. Malfoy was at all the sort of woman to cause a scene or scold a child who wasn't hers, but because the way she took Scorpius' chin in her hand and tipped his head back to get a good look at his face was only sweet and kindly until you saw her eyes.

Scary things, those eyes.

But Gamp apologized and then Higgs said he was sorry too, and because Italy was a coward he shrieked an apology from behind Eliza's trunk. Arthur was about to add his sentiments when he got a tender pat on the head from Mrs. Malfoy and she cooed that they were all darling children who were over-reacting, but she was so happy that Scorpius had good friends to count on and look after him.

Arthur made a point of lording that gesture of affection over Italy for the entire two week break:

"I hear what you’re saying about interest rates, Germany, but Mrs. Malfoy likes me more."

"What… What does that have to do with anything? Italy where are you going? It's not break time yet!"

So, vandalized paintings and missing ghosts aside, it wasn't a terrible end to first term.
Keeping Trouble Quiet

Going back to Hogwarts in January meant picking the real issues of their stay back up. Not potions essays and Quidditch tactics, but the disappearances:

The Bloody Baron was gone, along with Peeves the school poltergeist. What confused and frustrated Arthur the most was how none of the staff appeared upset or even concerned by these unusual dealings of the undead. If they were just putting on brave face then it still wasn’t comforting. The worst part of all was that he couldn’t even admit this to Italy, because it would mean adding fuel to the other nation’s angry fire.

Ghosts obeyed their own morbid rules. Most of the ghosts at Hogwarts had either died on the grounds or had returned back to them as an anchoring point after meeting their fates elsewhere. But that meant they couldn’t just leave either. Ghosts weren’t free to pack up and move, not without a great deal of strife, effort, and magic working either in their favour or, as Arthur hesitated to guess, against it.

Why else would the patron ghost of a house leave after several centuries guarding it? Arthur had unwillingly shared the story of a proud and pompous Slytherin alumnus who had wound up killing the woman he’d claimed to love and then lost his own life in the process. The Baron remained in the school waiting until the end of days to, supposedly, apologize to Ravenclaw’s house ghost for his mistakes. If you could earn his favour with a silver piece and a rattled chain, then the way to stir his wrath was to be caught in a dalliance outside of the house.

So why had Miss Adams been able to sneak out and go off unnoticed all year? The whole mess was beginning to turn Arthur’s nose.

After Christmas the ghosts themselves were hard to find, unusually quiet, and brief in their appearances. This applied to everyone except Nearly Headless Nick from Gryffindor- sort of. He was intolerant towards Slytherins and would vanish straight through walls if he saw anyone in green coming near him, but Arthur did see him hovering over students from his own house and chatting quietly with them at least once a week.

It was a little bit insulting, but the teachers had adopted the position that the Baron was probably just hiding down at the bottom of the lake and would come back eventually. He was a Hogwarts ghost, specifically a house representative. He would be back; they were sure of it.

Arthur just really wished the Baron's return could have been the day Nearly Headless Nick broke his vow of silence against Slytherins. Because not only did he do that, but he chose one of their potions lessons down in the dungeons to make his move. It was rather like a cold slap in the face.

"Kirkland..."

Professor Slughorn had nodded off behind his desk while letting them work on vats of swelling solution. It was review before they'd move onto new content for the semester, which was strange because they'd already reviewed it before Christmas, but since everyone was quite confident in their abilities on the Slytherin side of the room no one protested or pointed out this obvious lapse in the syllabus.

"A suspicious name to carry, even worse to go asking questions with." Sir Nicholas came right in through the classroom wall, drifting with hands clasped behind his back before he promptly dropped to the floor like he suddenly had weight and mass. This was an illusion, because he walked straight...
through Eliza Gamp's desk, finding Arthur with his black eyes before taking off into the air again and drifting back between the Gryffindor students, some of whom shuffled to escape the inevitable dousing of cold ghost essence.

He rose up again at once much like a whale breaching through a wave or a massive owl spreading its wings over a nest to protect the students behind him. The display was a mystery to the children but Arthur looked away and saw Italy watching him very closely and maybe even fingering the end of his wand.

"Have I done something, Sir Nicholas?" Arthur asked.

"No," The ghost answered, reedy voice high and almost offended as he washed over another Gryffindor and the boy performed a full-body shiver with his tongue sticking out as a reaction to the feeling. Sir Nicholas didn't notice, his chin wagging a bit too much where the wide ruffs around his neck weren't doing a very good job of keeping him secure. The ghost's hands were still clasped as he floated up in front of Arthur, and he could feel Scorpius gripping the back of his robe where their potion smelled like it was starting to burn. "But that's precisely the thing, Mister Kirkland. You're a boy."

"I don't fancy I'd look that great in a skirt." The twitter of nervous laughter from the other slytherins made the jab worth it, but the ghost came so close to him as a result that Arthur felt his nose going cold.

"The Kirkland I knew was never a boy..."

"That sounds a bit crazy, don't you think?" Even nations were children for at least a little while. Perhaps never babies, and often not young for very long, but still. They had their time. "Are you here to tell me where the Bloody Baron is, or should I get back to my brewing, sir?"

"I can assure you, Kirkland, when I find out where he's gotten off to, you won't be on my list of people to tell first."

"What's wrong with the name Kirkland?" He then demanded, sensing that the ghost was getting ready to vanish. The affronted look on Sir Nicholas' face made Arthur regret asking.

"A blunted axe, Mister Kirkland. A blunted axe."

It took several letters home over January into February pestering Wales before a new owl arrived alongside Scotland's mangy, angry familiar. The brown barn owl had inquisitive green eyes and a great love of being petted on the head, and brought a letter from his other brother. Inside was the patchwork story written in multiple different inks showing how many times Wales had forgotten to finish it. Executions had a habit of blurring together once you were around for more than a few centuries, but when the reason was a noble from your king's court transfiguring a noble lady's front teeth into a giant tusk, it tended to stick.

"What I'm saying is, I guess I should of been a bit nicer and let him have the sword instead." Yes, Wales, maybe that would have been the nicer thing to do. No wonder the Gryffindor House ghost hated him, but it was his brother he should have been intolerant of- England was innocent!

By the time Valentine's day passed them, Arthur could tell that Italy was plenty fed up with their lack of progress. Either he wanted an answer for the Bloody Barron, Peeves the Poltergeist, One-Eyed William and several other ghosts students claimed they couldn't find around the castle anymore, or he wanted access to those scarred paintings.
Considering Valentine's was marked by the shrill screams of two more paintings and an abrupt end to the red-pink-and-white festival that Sunday afternoon, Italy's preference as far as the mysteries went was obvious.

"We're confined to the common room so I don't know what you expect."

Italy didn't answer him where the twelve-year-old boy was reclined in a green chair in the dungeons, fingers drumming on the polished wooden knob at the end of the arm-rest. Higgs was with his brother and Scorpius looking at Quidditch numbers from the national teams, and Gamp had excused herself to go write a letter home. It gave Arthur and Italy a bit of relative privacy in the crowded room, but the other nation wasn't about to suggest a game of cards or chess to pass the time.

In fact, he had a particularly grim look on his face, one Arthur didn't appreciate because it made him think of a time long long ago when Italy had been almost that same size and worn exactly the same face. Spices had never tasted so bitter as when they'd passed through Venetian hands.

"What are you thinking?" Arthur asked, sitting up a bit straighter when he realized Italy's silence was backed up by the way his brown eyes seemed half out of focus. They didn't follow him when Arthur moved, but darted off somewhere else like he was about to turn his head, iri floating back into position a moment later. He was still drumming his fingers, but his impassive face didn't shift when Arthur drew his wand and flicked it several times with the random lights on the tip like he was drawing for a game.

Arthur pointed his wand at an abandoned snap card resting on the table, it gave a loud pop, and while he terrified one of the first years, his friend didn't react.

"What are you doing?" Dropping his voice to a hiss, Arthur stood up and walked over to the chair, nudging Italy's hand off the arm-rest and hiking a leg up so he could sit on it next to him, looking down like they were having a conversation when there was clearly no communication. Brushing a few wayward strands of cat-hair off his own robe, Arthur stopped when he saw the nest of white hairs on the front of Italy's robe, but a quick glance around the common room told him the cat was nowhere to be found.

"You didn't-"

He jumped up and immediately went down to the second-year dorms, ripping the covers back off Italy's bed before marching straight back upstairs to the common room.

Italy was still comatose, and Arthur stood fuming in front of him for the next several minutes, wand in his hand and arms folded tersely as he waited. It took a wretchedly long time, and then as suddenly as he'd fallen into his trance, Italy took a deep breath though his nose, blinked his eyes, and seemed to tense up all at once before stretching his shoulders back and limbering up with a great big yawn.

Arthur made sure to wave his wand directly in front of the idiot's nose, a threatening red afterimage following the tip and getting the other nation to tense up suddenly, shoulders pressed back and one foot braced on the table in front of him.

"Don't ever do that again." Arthur hissed.

"Do what?"

"Where's your cat?"

Italy smiled with a satisfied turn of the lips, head nodding to the side before he shrugged. Before he
could lie and say he didn't know, Arthur got a foot up on the chair and took Italy hard by the collar, jerking him up and ignoring the pouty look he put on. He was too two-faced for his own good sometimes.

"If you get caught doing magic like that then this whole thing will be over before you know it." How did Italy want to explain a low-level possession spell? Arthur didn't care that Gino, as a familiar and centuries old, had probably been completely willing to go for a stroll around the castle with Feliciano looking through his eyes. It wasn't about animal cruelty, it was about the animal being found out by a professor, caught, and the spell sensed before it could dissipate properly. No second- or third-year child at Hogwarts could use distance magic like that, it wasn't only beyond their skill and focus level, but no doubt banned as well.

"Maybe," He answered with a sickeningly self-satisfied tone, a hand around Arthur's and telling him to let go. Arthur relented, but he made a point of pushing when he did so. "But I didn't get caught." Arthur watched him settle back down in his seat, one ankle up and resting on his other knee. He still looked too damned comfortable reclined like that. "And I found what I was looking for."

The idiot cat spent the night trapped outside the Slytherin dorms. Gino was less than thrilled when one of the seventh years opened the door the next morning and the damp, shivering animal bolted inside. The boys were similarly non-plussed when Gino woke them all up with his caterwauling. And yet, none of that could shake Italy's smile off his face.

He'd found the paintings.

"You're going to get caught."

"Then I'll get caught." Feliciano didn't really want to go around Hogwarts with its spooky halls in the middle of the night, but he also couldn't justify spending another year away from home and work without any answers to show for it. "You're coming with me, right?"

"Absolutely not!"

They kept it a secret from Scorpius, which was really, really hard to do since he was always with them. The boy was also easily excitable and had a lot more to say now that he was both on the Quidditch team and doing a lot better. They won their second match against Hufflepuff in February, and that was the day Feliciano made his move.

It was easy when the common room was exploding with streamers and silvery confetti, upperclassmen belting out songs and England so distracted by the jumping and laughing that Feliciano slipped out the common room door and was on his way. It was still late afternoon and he carried his book bag with him hanging under one arm, the perfect excuse if he was caught wandering the halls alone instead of being in the common room celebrating. There was no rule against going through the school during the day either, but Feliciano did pick up his pace when he heard unfamiliar voices elsewhere in the stone corridors. A lone Slytherin, second year or not, could still become a target.

Under his influence, Gino had found a locked door and hidden beside it in the shadows while professors hurried by and spoke. He knew which floor it was on and had passed by it several times already just getting to classes, detouring with England glaring at him and muttering bitterly under his breath about just waiting for the end of the year to talk to the Headmistress. Feliciano wasn't having any of it.
He wanted to know if the trend he'd started noticing, the similarities pieced together after hours skimming through library books about the castle and its history... He wanted to know if all of that was real, or just an illusion he'd been conjuring for himself.

So, before he found the door that looked like almost any other door in the school, big and heavy with split wooden panels buffed with faded polish and the creak of wrought iron hinges, Feliciano made sure to tap the stones on the nearest hall corner twice with his wand. He set a charm there and walking down the rest of the corridor, past his destination, and setting another one like it. A simple little enchantment that worked like a trip-wire. He'd be able to feel anyone coming and know to either hide or flee.

Then he turned his attention on the lock, muttering the simple words to open it first before gritting his teeth at the heat that ran down his wand's black body. Sliding one foot back to brace himself, he felt threads of magic shooting down through the ancient wood, pushing back like he was going to lock horns with it before his power pushed around and through, out-maneuvering the enchanted block and smashing through the lock with a dusty rattle.

The handle gave under his hand and with a single look back at the daylight through the windows, Feliciano shut the door behind him, sealing himself in darkness.

The room was dark and cluttered, an abandoned classroom with chairs up on desks and white sheets tossed over piles of abandoned furniture. The stale air smelled like dust and the door gave a heavy clunk as the lock settled back firmly into place. Scattered under the shuttered windows and propped up against the walls were what Feliciano had been searching for: paintings.

Dead paintings.

It was a little unreal. Wizard paintings took on a life of their own that complimented the desires of the artist. They weren't like photographs that took a snapshot of a moment and relived it endlessly in a cycle. A painting could collect memories like dust, wander the mysteries of their ornate backgrounds and visit the frames of friends and colleagues on other walls. Portraits of famous wizards often learned as much about themselves as they could, but with a distinct awareness of their own purpose and the fact that they were not the person themselves, merely a likeness, a flattery, and often a kind, happy memory.

A dead painting, in the wizarding world, was a tragedy.

A dead painting was more than water seeping down the canvas or age turning the frame to a brittle mess. It wasn't the nails coming out the back end of the portrait or careless dollops of paint across lace cuffs and rays of sunshine. A dead painting was something destroyed, not damaged, something torn apart and killed on purpose, murdered like anything else strangled to death.

Professors had whispered about spells. The children had wondered about swords or scissors. The other paintings cowering in the halls lived in the anxiety that they were next. What Feliciano found as he pulled back sheet after sheet was different. He lifted and moved frames so he could set them on the floor with his wand aglow and ghost lamps cast to hover overhead so he could see...

He found nail marks.

He saw brutal tears.

No clean slashes, but rough, raspy pulls across the canvas that bled magic at his touch and caused the sheets to curl and regress when he stroked them, looking for the cause. These weren't wild slashes with a knife or blade, not the way oils and pastels rolled up like beads down callous scratches before
finally nails took and hands began to rip and shred.

It screamed strength and determination, a crime of unbearable passion when turning the dead frames over one by one showed more damage pushing through from the painted sides, the outlines of hands and nails clawing and scratching to get through the paint.

But it was while he was on the backsides of those portraits and paintings that his other reason for being here reared its head.

*Abello.*

The artist's name for this one, a vineyard now devoid of colour, its revelers mutilated and grey on the barren ground, the wine just a black stain over rotted food.

*Nicolosi.*

A dove with a broken neck. Its canvas hard to uncurl where the rips had caused the old paint to warp and crumble back on itself. The castle in the background was in ruins, the poet laying under a dead tree with his quill fallen and broken beside the bird, face completely scratched off.

*Sapenti* had captured a historic event, a visit from Merlin to Rome where great gifts of wand-lore had been traded to help King Arthur and find a consensus about what to do with the fabled sword.

Merlin had flung himself on the sword now, Rome was in ruins and Feliciano had to put that one back before he made himself sick. He couldn't handle the sight of his capital, even a centuries old rendition of it, defiled with skeletons hanging out windows and happy markets collapsed and abandoned.

He scratched the names into the little notebook kept safe in the breast pocket of his school uniform, meticulous as he recorded the size and age of each painting. He prepared to go back to the library and cross-reference this information against what was in the school's books. He'd have more time there and it wasn't wise to try right now now as he picked another dead painting up and set it back in the place where he'd found it.

The next one made him pause.

He almost thought he read the name wrong.

Kneeling down carefully, Feliciano tucked his notes aside so they could dry, the paper rasping over the dry back of the canvas. He gestured to pull one of the ghost lamps down next to his shoulder so he could see, and then dipped his quill down the deep neck of the bottle.

He traced the flourishing F tucked into the corner of this painting, and then let his hand follow-through and carve *Vargas* on the back, cutting through the dust and age as the black ink soaked down and permeated the material.

There was a deep, rasping breath underneath him, a shiver of struggling breath before he almost knocked the ink well over and grabbed the frame hard enough to drive splinters into his fingers.

'Papa... P-papa...!'

"Shh, shhh, Belladonna..."

He was disappointed in himself for not remembering, he was angry with himself for not knowing how this had even happened. Feliciano couldn't remember giving one of his own pictures to
Hogwarts, it must have taken a journey through other hands to get here. When he turned it over, the grey sky bore the memory of brush strokes for fluffy white clouds. The bottom half of the canvas was gone, the Gondolier dead and Venice's waters stolen away. There was only the rounded top of a column resting in the far left corner, ribbons snipped and fallen in the dead air where the second subject of the painting was clinging.

Quite literally clinging, because Feliciano could barely see the ashen marks and memory of yellow paint where a gold fan had once fluttered with teasing romance. Her balcony was broken, her dress scratched away, face hidden behind the posts of her balcony and a wash of green silk- now white, from her curtains draped like a burial shroud.

His quill cut through the damaged paint and marked the full volume and burst of the dress, several fast, hard strokes that brought whimpers of pain from the image, detailing the weight of the curtain and the hidden form of her head. He gave her substance and where her fingers had been mutilated the quill bit harshly and separated fingers from knuckles, completing the flat arc of her palm before it lifted away and he drew the moving arm and the lace cinched at her elbow.

"It hurts... it hurt so much...!"

"Yes, I know it does, my love. Just a little longer..." He whispered in his own language, not standard Italian but the dialect of the region this painting had flattered. She understood him and she cried openly when he fixed the lines of the balcony, scraping his quill up around the door and window leading to her little flat. He sketched wine and a deep pillow over the remains of a chair, and when she stood, face and body still obscured by the curtain, he drew her other hand again and gave her skirt a laced hem with the shadow of her feet underneath.

"Where is he?" Her voice was so soft that even when she cried Feliciano had to hunch down and place his ear over the window. "Where is my love? What's become of him?"

Her window and balcony only ever took up the top quarter of the painting, the rest of it was a shambled city and a great black void where the canvas was damaged.

"Tell me what happened."

"Where is he?"

Tell her the truth? There was power in being the creator of a work like this, but when Feliciano tried to cut his quill down across the interior of the room and paint a tall body with long limbs and a masculine frame, the ink beaded and refused to take. He couldn't draw something that didn't belong...

"Who did this to you?"

"He's gone? He's gone! No! No he's gone!"

"Wait- answer me!"

His pleas couldn't stop her. The curtain around her face bore a mouth left gaping in an agonized scream, the ink beginning to bleed out of the painted image as she twisted and spun with a wail on her balcony, the little woman devoid of colour and screaming like a tender animal having the life crushed from its body. The tension she put on the curtain made the rod snap and hit the floor with a clatter, and her wails ended when her redrawn dress crumbled and the ink wept its black, marring way across the image. She collapsed in a heap by the chair as it faded, her sobs beginning to quiet as her mangled hand held the white-washed fan in a limp grasp.

A few moments later she was entirely silent. An unfelt wind brushed the curtain from her face, and
all that was left of the venetian maid was her fleshless skull screaming silently behind the curtain of academic ink. No more movement, the last of life surrendered for the sake of lost love.

He wiped away the blood with a handkerchief, reminding himself that it was only black ink, not red essence, and after he put the damaged canvas back against the wall, he dabbed away the fresh ink from his name.

Feliciano didn't go through the rest of the murdered artwork. He simply unlocked the door again and passed back out into the hall. His chest hurt.

He didn't care which way he went after that. He wanted sunlight and he wanted fresh air, but more than either of those he just wanted to be alone and to think. He had to process the pain of having one of his own creations, however old it had been, die right in front of him. He had to get through the insult and the deep-seated hurt of having Italian names in rapid succession come up in front of him as victims of vandalism, of brutality, of disrespect and anger—so much anger.

All of those names belonged to dead artists—some of their families still lived, but the artists themselves were beyond the veil now.

Beyond the veil, unlike the ghosts who were another mystery, less invasive and hurtful, but still lingering there on the very edge of everything else.

He was walking quickly, taking a flight of stairs up higher through the castle looking for a balcony or an open window, not even paying attention to where he was going as long as he kept moving. He could feel anger following him and he wanted to outrun it, anxiety reaching for his shoulders and forcing him around corners to get away from it. He didn't want a scene or to go back to the common room and sulk and cry until the emotions went away. What sort of message would that give to Scorpius who was supposed to be living the happiest day of his life after his Quidditch win? He couldn't take that from the boy, he'd gone exploring on his own and this was the price for it.

These feelings were a better punishment than—

"Accio!"

Feliciano stumbled to a dead halt in the corridor, baffled by what he'd just felt when something ripped his notebook out of his hand. The charm barely registered, it was just the absence of something he'd been clutching the entire way from the second floor that brought him to a short stop. It unclogged his ears that he hadn't known were ringing, and Feliciano turned at the sound of voices.

"There, that got your attention then, Vargas." Why, why was James Potter of all people standing there in the hallway, a troupe of Gryffindors behind him, and why was he holding Feliciano's notebook? "What's a snakeskin like you doing way up here near the towers?"

James Potter was a third-year student, messy black hair like his brother Albus but with none of the quiet shyness the younger Potter had. He wasn't very humble, word of mouth said he didn't need to be. Star seeker, excellent grades, lots of friends, famous parents. He had every right to enjoy his school years with a pedigree like that, but Feliciano drew the line at someone going around antagonizing other students for sport.

He approached the group, all four Gryffindors with their red-lined robes and lion badges over the hearts. When Feliciano stopped, he held a hand out and made his request plainly.

"I'm taking a walk. Can I have my book back, please?"

"Slytherins win one little match and think they have the run of the castle." Potter answered, looking...
surprised that Feliciano either wasn't cowering or crying or getting upset at him for taking it. Maybe if the ringing in his ears would go away, maybe if the feelings that he'd been running from weren't catching up with him as he stood there. "This isn't a school book you know, Vargas."

He was too angry for this.

Too insulted to put up with this.

He wanted his report back and then to be on his way, that was all Feliciano wanted.

He wanted to put thoughts and memories of dead children and murdered art to rest. He needed to just fall into a deep sleep and wrap himself in the illusion of childhood for a few days and surrender a letter to Lovino keeping him updated. He just couldn't deal with James Potter today.

"This is a diary, isn't it?" But James Potter insisted on flipping through the pages with one thumb holding the black cover, fanning them and stopping when he hit black script. Feliciano took a breath to ask him not to do that, to repeat his request that Potter just give the book back now and be done with it, but James just laughed and Feliciano's vision started getting very narrow and very black and fuzzy around the edges. "Look at this, these scribbles are nothing but nonsense! It really is a diary if he just keeps writing in Italian everywhere."

"That's enough, Potter." He almost called him boy, he swallowed the word and kept his hand out.

"Give it back."

"I'm not finished yet." And then Potter dared to- "Abello, Nicolosi-"

He lost his temper.

He didn't use his wand- he didn't need magic. He felt his weight go to his right foot and kicked his left one up, jumping forward and slamming the hard heel of his shoe against Potter's shin. The boy yelled until a punch from Feliciano's right fist caught him in the mouth and he dropped to the floor in a stunned, writhing heap.

Maybe he hit a little too hard, but he took back the diary and-

"Get him!"

His wand came out and stunned a tall dark-skinned girl with long curly hair, feet already carrying him back as a girl who looked like Rose Weasley came at him with her wand glowing blue. He didn't know the spell, he just thrust his wand up into the blast before it hit him, catching the enchantment and swinging his arm back around over his head before lashing it at a short blonde boy with glasses who instantly froze in mid-step.

A yellow bolt was caught the same way by his wand and slammed to the floor where it let off a jet of sour gas, but it left his arm open to a jet of blue fire from someone he couldn't see.

They caught his robe instantly, heat cutting straight through the fabric to his skin.

The fire cut through his instincts; spells abandoned because if he fought when injured then he would keep fighting. It was already taking him by the throat and the flames sinking their teeth into his flesh woke him up just enough that Feliciano turned tail and ran.

He ran, wand in his other hand and book between his teeth, heat blazing up his arm from wrist to shoulder before licking at his back and forcing him to tear off the robe. His book bag got caught in the fabric and was dropped on the floor with the burning robe, his sleeve singed and smoking as he
pumped his arms and went down the first flight of stairs at a dead sprint, almost crashing down the next flight.

The school moved by in a dusky blur, the sun setting somewhere outside the castle as he ran past the point of his lungs burning, feet slamming against cold stones because even if he couldn't hear anyone chasing him, he could feel the anger and the hurt and the insult and the pain all racing to catch him this time, and he couldn't surrender to them again.

"Mister Vargas?"

He ran so hard and so fast that when he heard someone say his name he couldn’t stop properly. His weight slipped out from under him and he slammed his tail-bone on the floor, skidding another foot before stopping in front of the infirmary’s white doors.

Professor Malfoy'd called his name because Scorpius' father was standing there in the hall next to Professor Flitwick. Feliciano laid there panting on the floor just long enough to see the shock on both their faces and feel the way their eyes fell to his smoking, burnt arm before he regained the ability to move.

"Vargas!"

Move, meaning flip over on his hands, kick his toes against the floor, and shoot back the way he'd come to find anywhere better to hide.

Anywhere, at all, to hide.
Myrtle's Bathroom

The celebrations in Slytherin house were worth getting caught up in, that was why Arthur didn't notice who was missing until most of the chatter and dancing were plenty over with. The team-members had finally been allowed to go wash and change after a February shower had doused Hufflepuff's hopes for the house cup.

Arthur didn't particularly care about Italy's disappearance however, not until Professor Malfoy swept into the common room and caused an abrupt silence. He played it off with a smile, but the way he summoned Zabini down into the dormitory was something else. Arthur didn't follow, but he did watch a confused exchange from his seat and told Higgs to hurry up and make his move across the chess board.

Professor Malfoy left and Head Boy Zabini made his rounds to the prefects and a few of his friends in seventh year, Arthur content to ignore them until the Head Boy was standing right over his seat and the nation had to sigh and acknowledge him.

"Kirkland, where's Vargas gone off to?"

"Told me he wanted to get some studying done in the library." Arthur lied, knowing it was better to give some sort of excuse for Italy's disappearance. "Why?"

"Professor's concerned about him. He's not the type to get in trouble from what I've seen though."

"Trouble?" He repeated. "Goodness no, Feliciano'd rather whine and cry and hide behind the first years than jump into a fight."

"Just the same, when he gets back here you send him to me, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

The Head Boy wandered off and Arthur didn't mind him after that, looking up a little when Scorpius hurried to find a seat on the couch next to him. Arthur didn't know why everyone seemed so focused on him when he was trying to build a subtle trap across the board that Higgs wouldn't notice until it was too late. Instead he had Scorpius vibrating next to him and pawing several times on his sleeve until Arthur relented and looked at him.

"What?"

"Vargas is hurt," Scorpius hissed, lips pulled thin around the words as he hunched his shoulders so the sound wouldn't pass beyond them.

Arthur didn't understand.

"What are you-?"

"I heard da- the Professor talking to Zabini when I was coming up here. Someone burnt up his robe and Professor Longbottom's got Vargas' bag in his office!" What..? "He was up near Gryffindor tower and Professor Flitwick and my dad saw him running with burns down his arm. Someone set him on fi-"

"This is a school." He said the words as coldly as he could, which was enough to snuff out Scorpius' wheezing voice completely. But Arthur's statement was meant as much for the boy as it was for
himself. "This is a school, a respectable institution. Students don't just set other students on fire at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardy." Not for wandering the halls alone, not for wearing certain colours on their robes, not for any reason would that sort of madness happen at Hogwarts.

That was the conviction Arthur Kirkland carried in his fist as he marched stony-eyed out of the Slytherin common room with Scorpius and Higgs behind him, wand vibrating in his pocket with all the things he'd do if forced to use it.

And all the words he'd have to give the administration if things really did come down to blows.

Feliciano ran until his enchanted body couldn't handle it anymore, bursting through a door roped off but left unlocked. He could taste a metallic tang in the air as he stumbled over broken tiles and saw a wall of cracked mirrors, rusted faucets, and deep sinks facing a wall of cubicles.

He went straight for the water, prepared to break the faucet head if he had to to get the cold water pouring down. His sleeve was blackened and browned, holes in the cloth showing where the fire had eaten straight through to his skin. He cared less about the visible damage than the screaming pain throbbing under the damaged cloth, sticking his whole arm under the stream and flexing his fingers frantically.

Cold water on a hot burn hurt. It hurt long before it felt good and his feet slipped back over the floor as he gasped and tried not to cry or scream at the shower of ice that shocked his blistered skin. He let all of his weight rest on the ceramic bowl and just closed his eyes, mouth wide open and sucking in air without releasing it. It hurt, it hurt...!

But he held his arm under the water, his other hand shaking when he splashed the spouting jet up over his elbow to attack and soothe the burns higher up his arm. Between his Slytherin tie, the bulk of his school sweater-vest, and then the button-down shirt underneath it all, he just stood there choking and couldn't find the will to undress and look at the wounds properly.

He stood for as long as he could because he knew the cold would do more good than harm. He doused his arm until his fingers were numb, his elbow aching and muscles sore under their burns when he finally relented and shut the tap off.

His legs had gone numb from running, a side-effect he hadn't dealt with yet in this new body because his normal one could run and run for hours without exhausting itself. There was no strength in weak knees or trembling muscles to carry him anywhere else, Feliciano just buckled and let his knees hit the floor, gasping at the pain of impact and catching himself on his other hand.

He leaned his shoulder against the cold wall, twisting around until he was wedged between two sinks and the cold copper pipes beaded with condensation. It was frigid and damp, but he closed his eyes and wrapped his good arm around the one still inflamed and beginning to throb again without the cold wash to keep it contained.

Ah- those were tears in his eyes, weren't they? He was exhausted, physically and emotionally and it was rare to deal with both at once. A smile crawled up his face as the first unwilling tear leaked from his eye, the rest were easier to bear though. He was alone and the worst was over now, he'd been through his ordeal and now he'd earned his rest. Crying would just help the emotions pass sooner, bring the healing sleep that would deal with the weakness in his legs and the surging pain in his arm.

He'd run so hard to get away from the professors because he hadn't trusted himself to speak or to explain. He couldn't rationalize how the fight had started and he couldn't explain his presence up where so many Gryffindors had been unexpectedly clustered. He must have been close to their
common room; they were supposed to be up in one of the towers, weren't they?

Meaning Feliciano'd wandered a long hard way from the dungeons and the second floor classroom where he'd done his snooping. He was going to get in trouble if he didn't hurry back towards the dorms soon before lights out, but a quick look down at his hands told him he'd just have to suffer with the cold tonight.

Magic flames didn't care about normal physics: they just devoured whatever they were cast on. Feliciano looked down at skinned knuckles weeping blood where blisters had popped, the back of his hand bright red and hardly spared by the presence of his shirt cuff and abandoned robe. The thick top layer, at least, had spared him most of the pain.

The holes in his shirt came from the hottest part of the fire: the place where the spell had collided with his arm. It hurt a lot more to have the far side of his forearm seared, but that was how he'd raised his arm to block the spell from hitting his body. If those flames had struck him in the chest or face instead...

He couldn't recall clearly enough if the spell could have been lethal if it had hit him properly. If not death, then disfigurement for sure unless Professor Malfoy was skilled and fast enough to reverse the damage... Too risky.

Children attacking children with fire, it brought more tears down his face and when his chest contracted harshly with a sob it jostled his arm and made his weak legs pull up under him trying to make himself smaller. Heal already...

It wasn't that simple though, healing. He was a continent from home and stranded without a patriot or kindred soul for hundreds of miles. England was his friend but it was different, they were similar but they weren't the same. Any Nation had more in common with one of their own than someone else like them. If England or Scotland suffered something like this then they'd heal in a matter of hours, but in his case...

Maybe he shouldn't have run away. But how was he supposed to explain? The magic would cause a reaction, a glow, a shimmer, a kind of heat because it was right on the surface and not lower down. You couldn't die from a burn unless it went far or led to infection- something Nations couldn't get. If he'd been speared through the gut then that would have work beginning at once. That time he'd crashed his broom in first year had been an internal injury, organs bruised and weeping blood and fluids into places they didn't belong. This was different: the blood-loss was minimal, the damage was superficial, but the pain...

"He looks wretched, you'd ought to just come out now."

Feliciano's eyes snapped open but he didn't see the speaker, just heard a shuffle and metal creak somewhere that got him shoving his shoulders against the wall. If he was meant to hide or to push himself up between the sinks again and flee was too hard to figure out. His hips left the floor only to slide back down, wincing harshly as he shuddered from the pain and swallowed a hard groan that leaked out of him as a whimper instead.

"Vargas?"

"Gamp?"

He saw her shoes first, round-toed loafers kicking at the green hem of her robe. He finally realized that he was in a girl's bathroom and felt an embarrassed heat stain his cheeks. But Eliza Gamp's voice was weak and fluttering: a strong sign that she'd been crying. When she came around the sinks
and saw him, Feliciano's stomach bottomed out because of the horrified gasp and the way she flung her hands up over her mouth.

"What happened!?” Her black braid had come loose over the top of her head, wisps of hair flying away and her face puffy and still red from too much crying, eyes bloodshot while she focused on him instead. "Your arm! Let me see it-"

She washed words over him as she knelt down and coaxed him to let her look at his arm. It wouldn't do much good for a child to try and help him, but she made the effort and he knew he looked pathetic with the tears on his face and burns still volatile across his skin. She undid the button around the sleeve cuff and was surprisingly gentle as she pulled and rolled the wet fabric up to his elbow, watching the way he winced and apologizing for being too rough.

"We have to take you to Professor Malfoy right away."

"No- if we do that then I'll have to explain."

"Well you should explain!” She had such a terse way of speaking when she wasn't the one in trouble, sitting back on her heels with shoulders set and chin climbing so she was practically scolding him. "What happened? I heard you come crashing in here and now you're sitting on the floor, hurt and missing your robe. February's too cold for you to go forgetting it in the dormitory yet."

It was too cold, and just listening to Eliza point it out made the damp environment of the bathroom stand out. He hadn't taken a proper look around but the windows were grimey over their heads, musty old cob-webs that looked abandoned by their spiders stretched across the buttresses that made the ceiling. The floor was wet where he was sitting, the wall behind him beaded with condensation that cut through his shirt and made the vest feel like too little too late to keep him warm. Burnt and freezing, it was a maddening combination.

"Vargas?” He hadn't said anything, that was why- "Feliciano it- it's okay…” his silence worried her. He wasn't crying any more than before, his tears had actually slowed down and he was just sitting there in the cold with his burnt arm exposed and throbbing. His wounds were starting to tingle with the early stages of healing. It would take hours, most likely days, before the pain completely went away...

But he saw the ink stains on his fingers and he remembered why he'd been wandering so urgently through the castle. He remembered the book that was in his lap and why he'd fought so viciously to get it back. He remembered being wept to by a spirit that perished before his eyes. And now the cold, heavy weight of the cross under his clothes woke up to remind him how it kept him locked in this body. He was trapped like this, unable to stand or run to escape all the pain and sorrow that this mission kept bringing him.

And then that thought just brought more futility along with it, because Feliciano was on a mission. He was here by choice. He had a world beyond Hogwarts to run and escape to, he had his identity and his purpose and a history of accomplishments and lessons to rely on. He was three thousand years old and hiding behind a mask of twelve years, but what about the ones who didn't?

"Why were you crying, Ellie?” He asked, looking up and startling her with the way he dismissed her question. He knew she'd been crying. They all knew she cried all the time about almost anything, but why here? "You don't come here a lot, do you?"

"Oh, I-" her round face flushed an angry red colour, her skin splotched from her old tears and her hair still out of sorts. When Gamp looked down at her hands, Feliciano noticed her rolling her wand
between her fingers, the dogwood rod slightly crooked and molded to fit her tiny palm. "I just... it's quiet here is all. No one ever comes to Myrtle's bathroom."

"I got in a fight with Potter, why are you here?" He finally told her part of why he'd wound up on the floor like this, but Eliza just squirmed unhappily in her own way, still crouched on the damp floor next to him as she wrapped her arms around herself to keep away the cold.

"The same old thing really." She whispered, eyes cast down and looking at the rows of faucets and old rust. "Half-blood Gamp. My father defiled the Gamp name by marrying my mother you know, one of my great-grandparents was a muggle, I think." With her arms wrapped around her knees now, Eliza tipped forward so her face was looking down at the floor, some of her loose hair hanging around her head. "I named the wrong spell to fix a rip in Margaret’s robe this afternoon after the match. I didn't use it, just suggested it, but the way they started laughing at me..."

"We're in the same house, they shouldn't do that to you."

"You're either supposed to be a pure blood or an outstanding wizard, there's no room to be not good at anything in Slytherin." English Wizards took blood-lines so seriously still... Ellie was crying again when she looked up at him, big grey eyes full of tears as she sniffled around the back of her throat and asked a question. "Is it the same in Italy? I'll bet its worse, you had to come all the way to Hogwarts for a reason, didn't you?" It really hurt to hear her say things like that...

"In Italy, where you're born is more important than anything." Region to region, north versus south, it was looser now than it had been in generations before: intermarriage was slightly more bearable, but just going from Venezia to Lobardi could still cause a scandal... "Muggleborns are rounded up at once by older families and our schools are very small, more like clubs I guess." Secret societies in each major city reflecting borders Feliciano himself had dissolved centuries ago. Muggle-born wizards were a treasure because they were new blood, often talented, and almost always willing to blindly give their loyalty to whichever house found and reared them. They were nicer about it now than in centuries past too: now they actually let the children stay with their mothers and fathers, not steal them away in the middle of the night, never to be seen or heard from again...

"But you're still a pureblood, right?" She looked at him with a sad, hopeless look of envy. She must have seen in him and the others everything that would make her life so much easier.

"My blood is..." Oh, how to explain... he wanted to do more than just deflect the question, and when he looked down at his burnt hand he saw the way the skin closest to his knuckles was already scabbing over and beginning to cool down. "It would cause our family a lot of problems if I went to any one school in Italy, Hogwarts is... better." Even his own words made it sound like Lovino was using him, sending him here for political reasons when in fact he was the one who was so determined to go through with this. How was it supposed to look if his family was keeping him in a place where students who walked alone were set against groups of upperclassmen for no reason?

He knew how to defend himself, but what if it had been Scorpius walking alone or, god forbid, Gamp either before or after leaving this cold little prison behind?

His thoughts were flung back to a discussion a year gone and branded into the pages of the diary James Potter had tried to take from him. He remembered the story of a girl who wasn't afraid to force her way into the boy's dormitory and hex them until their robes were pink and purple. She’d put them each firmly in their scolded place only to give in later to frustrated tears because living in this castle was not easy, and trying to get by in the green robes of what everyone called an evil house just made it even harder.

He remembered the gouges that had carved up her face and lay like open mouths screaming agony in
death, and then Feliciano looked up at Eliza Gamp with a kind of fear he hadn't considered before. He'd have to tell England.

Even if it was completely stupid, or it doubted Eliza's strength at all, they couldn't let it happen again. Not like that.

Never again like that.

"That's why you don't want to talk to Professor Malfoy, isn't it?" Feliciano spent so long dwelling on that fear that he almost didn't hear Ellie talking to him again over the sound of dripping water. "Because if he writes home to your brother it will cause trouble for him and his job. You do seem to think his job is important, don't you?"

"Oh, Ellie I couldn't begin to tell you how much work he does." She was wrong, but her understanding made a good cover story, he took it and adopted it easily. "To start a fight between the clans, even a little one like where I should go to learn magic, it would put him under so much stress I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

"I understand..." Ellie started dabbing at her face with her sleeve, wiping away the tears that had slowed down again and left her eyes bloodshot all over again. "How are you going to get back to the commons looking like that though? Your robe's gone and your shirt's all wet, maybe you can transfigure it back to normal without all the burns?"

"I can try," He didn't feel like moving yet but agreed with what she said, pulling his right arm around to...

No...

He just slumped back against the wall again, feeling defeated and letting Ellie watch him closely for a few seconds before she understood too.

"...You keep your wand case hooked inside your robe, don't you?" He did. He got to be wandless all over again until one of the Gryffindors found and either gave it back or taunted him to the point where a professor noticed. "Oh, Vargas..."

"Why don't you try instead? I think I know which spell to use." Her eyes went wide and her shoulders tensed up as soon as he said it, Ellie's whole body tipping over until she caught herself with one hand.

"Oh no- that's a terrible idea! I'm awful at transfiguration!"

"So is Higgs, but since he started sitting next to me he's been doing better. Just try."

"Your arm is already burnt! What if I hit your skin instead of the shirt and it- it does something wretched?"

"The worst that can happen is-" Feliciano stopped when he saw her wand swish up and point directly at his mouth.

"Don't finish that sentence." She scolded. "According to Charles the last time you said those words they came true: Scorpius fell off his broom and some of the Gryffindors still laugh at him for it."

They sat there and they bickered about it for another five or ten minutes. Ellie only finally gave in
when Feliciano closed his hand over hers and they both repeated the spell together with the wand absolutely still. He rolled his sleeve carefully back down over the burns, took her hand again, and on the count of three they-

*POP!*

His sleeve vanished instead of fixing itself. Ellie dropped her wand with a clatter, both hands up over her mouth as she shrieked.

"*I'm sorry!*"

"At least it didn't hurt?"

"*I'm sorry! I'm so sorry I told you I'm no good with it!*" She didn't calm down after one cry and Feliciano jumped when he saw her eyes misting up with tears again, shocked enough to reach out with both hands only to have her jump straight to her feet in front of him, hands balled up at her sides and whole body shaking, face scrunched up with furious tears and chest rattling with broken sobs.

"Ellie-?"

"I told you! I told you and you made me try it anyways!" What started as a shriek built up quickly into a scream: "You made me do it! You're so stupid for going off on your own and getting into fights, and then you come in here and show me just how awful I am at being a Slytherin and a witch! It's your fault- *I hate you!*"

"*Eliza!*"

She flung her arms up over her face and ran from him, sprinting across the ruined bathroom to the wall where she pushed herself off and out the door. Feliciano barely made it to one knee with the fingers of his bare arm touching the cold floor, and he was left there with a numb feeling replacing all the other little aches and pains in his body.

"*Now you've done it.*" He didn't even get a chance to take it all in before he heard the voice behind him, raspy and not-quite there, feminine and feral. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw nothing. "*Now you've done it.*"

He grabbed Gamp's wand off the floor, the dogwood contorting in his hand because it didn't recognize or want him holding it. Standing up on shaking legs, his wand arm was the one that had been burnt and it hurt too much to raise and use. His left hand fumbled around the distrustful wand, and when he felt something rumbling through the cracked tiles under his feet he shifted his balance and tried backing up towards the door.

"Who's there!?" Somewhere in their conversation Gamp had said a name, she'd said this bathroom belonged to someone. His eyes kept searching but he didn't see anyone, the sound of water bubbling and roaring up somewhere making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"*You chased her off- you made her go away! Did I say you could? No I didn't!*" Where the hell was it coming from!? The fear was running cold down his back and Feliciano's hand was shaking trying to hold the wand at all, nevermind keep it up so he could use it. The voice hit the mirrors and bounced off the wall, bits of grit falling from the ceiling as the loud splash of water started backing up from the toilets hidden behind metal doors.

"*Look at him! Such a pureblood! Look at this! So talented! Vargas is such a cute boy, such a sweet boy! Vargas would never make a fool out of anyone! He'd never pull a dirty rotten trick in his entire...*"
The toilets were gushing water and the faucets one by one cranked themselves wide open, the voice howling through the air before cold wind came from somewhere and the cracked windows overhead started hissing with escaping air.

"How dare you! Go away! How dare you! Leave this place! HOW DARE YOU!"

Something blue and not quite there was misting off the mirrors and Feliciano felt every icy word jump through his flesh, terror grabbing him by the gut and getting his voice up, the water sloshing at his shoes when he looked down at the lapping pools.

He looked up and felt more than he saw: felt the cold and the wind and a piercing scream that roared through him with hands curled like claws and mouth gaping wide. And it wasn't the sight, it was the scream:

"HOW DARE YOU!!"

Feliciano didn't hear himself scream, he just felt it when his throat opened up and his lungs emptied. He slipped and fell in the ice-cold water and slammed his burnt arm on the floor, clawing with Ellie's wand still clutched in his hand before he found his feet and ran screaming for the door. He heard water jetting into the air and raining back down but hit the wall with both hands and then slammed them on the old bathroom door, nearly catching himself on the ropes strung up to tell students it was out of order.

He took two steps straight out into the warmer, deceptively calmer air of the hallway and slammed straight into England.

"Oh my god-!" He didn't even know it was England, not right away. He just knew he hit a body that was small like his, warm and dry and stronger than his that he flung both arms around hard, eyes level with a green and silver tie. He heard the voice, recognized it, and shut his eyes with relief. He pushed his face down between England's shoulder and throat as soon as he felt a shocked, stumbling hug close around him in return.

His knees collapsed a moment later, and he knew for sure it was England because he followed Feliciano down and knew how to take his weight. Hands touched his back and his hair briefly, and then he heard a familiar voice wrapped up in the wrongness of a charm that turned his voice back a thousand years.

"You're soaking wet! Where the hell have you been?" He didn't answer, he didn't care, he just hung on as hard as he could and felt tears leaking out of him because it was all too much for him right now. Deaths and attacks and regrets and hauntings- he couldn't do it; he couldn't do this much...

"We saw Gamp go screaming by and Scorpius went after her." Feliciano didn't say a single thing, he just let Arth- let England talk to him and take his black school robe off, swinging it around Feliciano's shoulders to cover how filthy he was, working his wounded bare arm through one sleeve. He kept his eyes shut throughout, face down and close against him, but England didn't let him get away with it for long. Even with arms still around him and holding him just as close, England refused to get caught up in the storm dragging Feliciano down.

"Hurry up, there's a passage just around the corner to get back into the dungeons." He couldn't move and he could barely stand... "Get up, Feliciano, before someone finds us-!

He wept instead.
It was all he was good for.

He just wept.

It didn't matter how Italy wound up in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, what mattered was getting him back down to the common room and safety.

Safety he clearly needed, because they weren't half-way through the secret passage from the first floor down to the dungeons when Italy just stopped walking and just sat down on the dark, dusty steps.

"What are you doing?"

"I need a minute..."

"We haven't got a minute! You completely missed dinner and if either of us want to have a decent conversation we'd better get to the dormitory right away!"

"England." Oh, he didn't much like that tone of voice Italy took with him, not because it was rude or impetuous, but because it sounded so defeated... "Just a minute..."

"What the devil did you see in that room?"

"Lots of things." Italy just sat there, hands clenched in his red hair, shoulders stooped in Arthur's borrowed robe. He hadn't asked where Italy's was: he knew that answer from Scorpius. "It's not just that. It's a lot of things, too many things."

"What happened to your arm?"

"Potter happened to my arm."

Arthur stepped forward and knelt right in front of him, a step below so Italy had to look up and face him.

"As your partner, I'm asking you to tell me what happened." Arthur didn't want to read it in some report years from now, he didn't want to have McGonagall asking him things he knew nothing about, he didn't know how he'd handle letters too or from their brothers in their respective capitals if Arthur was here beside Italy for all of this but missed everything that was important. "I should have gone with you today, I'm sorry I didn't, but you have to tell me."

And Italy did tell him in slow, unwilling pieces. He put the words together and dropped them into Arthur's hand like bronze coins, their value only totalling as more were added to the pile.

"Every painting I touched in that room was Italian in origin."

"From your part of the country? Could you tell?"

"No, I wrote down the names and I'll be sending them to Lovino in the morning. He has access to the records, even the city ones in my territories."

"But they were all Italian."

"One of them was Italy's."

There was a long, solemn pause after Italy's comment and Arthur just let the silence rest, he needed
to process it on his own.

"Yours-yours?"

"If you don't believe me, we can go to the library and find the Venetian Gondolier in the records. My name must be there somewhere." This was not what Arthur wanted to hear, and it left him without anything to say as he stood up straight and rubbed a hand back and forth over his mouth, trying to sort through the shocked feelings making his skin tingle and snag him under the collar. This was all terrible news on top of worse rumours.

"Tell me Professor Longbottom didn't really find your half-burnt robe and book bag outside Gryffindor tower."

"Is that why there were so many Gryffindors around?" Italy fired back, wincing as he pulled his arm free of Arthur's borrowed robe so the dim light of the corridor shone down over the blistered skin and dried blood. His burns were serious, second degree by the looks of it, but at least with his healing he'd be alright in no more than three or four days. Tonight would be the hardest.

But if he'd been human, his injuries would have been outstanding.

"Before you ask, I didn't see who let it off."

"The castle's been in an uproar all evening looking for you. Malfoy and Longbottom may just come to blows if this isn't sorted out quickly."

"Malfoy could take him."

"That's not the point." And it wasn't so simply cut and dry- even if the idea of professors dueling each other was simply outlandish in and of itself! "The point is that you need to decide whether we're going straight to the infirmary or the Headmistress's office."

"I'll talk to Malfoy tomorrow." Tomorrow, so his wounds would have a chance to heal first... Arthur hated the idea of waiting but it was sensible. "How long until lights out?"

Arthur flipped his wrist over, a habitual shake of the arm meant to knock back the sleeve of the robe he wasn't wearing.

"Another thirty minutes I'd say." Italy didn't move, just wrapped a hand around his hurt arm below the shoulder, hissing in a breath and refusing to touch the inflamed skin for fear of pain. He'd be better once he could douse it in cold water again back in the dormitory, but in the meantime Arthur knelt down in front of him again. "I take it you'd rather hold up here and wait?"

"Pretty much..."

"Here, let me see that."

Italy's wand had been left behind with his robe, and idiotic thing that was only compounded by Gamp making the same mistake. At least Italy had gathered her wand up before fleeing the bathroom, quite surprising given how he'd been ejected from it. It prompted the other nation to speak too.

"Tell me about the ghost in the girl's washroom."

"Moaning Myrtle you mean?" Holding Italy by the unblemished ends of his fingers, Arthur gave a measuring wave of his wand before gently tapping the end against Italy's knuckles. "One of Tom
Riddle's very first victims I'm afraid. It must have been nearly eighty years ago now when she died."

There was little more to say beyond that, a few rumours, things picked up during their time here and garnered from chit chat he remembered from during the Wizarding Wars. While Arthur spoke, his wand tip ejected a stream of white gauze bandages, the fabric binding itself around Italy's forearm, special care taken at the elbow so he could still bend the joint as they covered the raw skin creeping up his arm to his shoulder, stopping when they ran out of injured flesh to deal with. He gave a tentative flex before murmuring his thanks. Bandages wouldn't help with the pain, but they'd keep the robe from brushing against it while he hid the fact that his sleeve was missing.

"Hey, England." After that there was nothing else to do but make Italy shuffle over so Arthur could sit on the stone step next to him and on his good side. "Are we friends now?"

"Hm? That's an odd question to ask, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but I just want to make sure. We've been doing this for two years and I want to come back for a third." Frankly, this time Arthur wanted to make sure they came back too. First year hadn't held much in terms of strange behaviour or suspicious occurrences, but this year was shaping up to be quite different. The paintings more than the ghosts worried him now. "So, I just want to make sure I'm not wrong about this. You and me, we're friends, right?"

"Yes." He answered, looking down the dark passage in front of them and not sure if he was embarrassed or about to smile when he gave his response. Nations had pointed out just over Christmas that England and North Italy were surprisingly close now after a year and a half of charades and magic. It was to be expected though, wasn't it? Arthur couldn't say he minded it that much either.

"Good!" Even if it did mean getting a one-armed hug and a chirpy reply from Italy, who hugged him tight around the neck and made sitting on the steps together unbearable. "Because friends keep secrets for friends, right? That means I can tell you something important, right?"

"You're acting weird now stop it." Arthur groaned, fighting his way free of the embrace and threatening Italy's burned arm with a swat of his wand if he didn't let go. It worked. "What's this about secrets?"

"You know about the duelling club here at the school, right?" That wasn't much of a secret given how Professor Malfoy had announced it to them right before Christmas break. Italy and Arthur had both scoffed at the idea at the time because between the Quidditch nonsense and getting ready for their meetings and conferences back home, there'd been no time for pretending they didn't know how to perform a simple disarm or blast-back curse.

"You know how Professor Creevey heads the duelling club?" Arthur really didn't see where any of this was going. "And he put a sign up form for an end-of-the-year tournament?"

Now he saw.

Now he didn't like.

"Absolutely not." He shot the idea down instantly and was terrified when Italy's forced grin didn't waver.

"I'm not saying you have to, but it's divided by year so second years can join." But not first years, because they simply didn't have enough spells at their disposal. "I'm going to ask him about it tomorrow after I get my wand back."
"Why?"

His question changed Italy's smile from fake over to simply not there anymore, because yes, his lips were curved and his cheeks were dimpled, but only an idiot would have called that expression a smile.

"Because James Potter seems to have it in his head that Vargas wizards can't hold their own in a fight," he said, and his voice was still young and fluted, but that's where the innocence of it ended. "And I'm going to prove him wrong." Arthur took a breath.

This was not what he'd wanted to deal with tonight.
An Introduction to Duelling

There was a great deal said between the two nations during the sneaking and scurrying to get back to Slytherin House. Most of it was useless to repeat as Arthur understood the deeply wrong nature of James Potter’s attack on Italy. As ignorant as the boy was of Vargas’ identity, the point stood that he never should have raised a hand against another student, period. When Arthur reached for anger on Potter’s behalf to defend him from Italy, it left a lot wanting.

When they finally did make it back to the Slytherin dormitory, it was half past eleven and Arthur was wise enough to stop Italy from hurrying back inside. He set off a loud banging by hexing a suite of armour down and around a different corridor. The two of them waited until after Professor Malfoy stormed out of the house before quickly dashing through the open portal behind him. Whomever was awake in the common room didn’t stop them before they vanished down into the second-year dorm.

For some bizarre reason Scorpius’ bed was also empty when they got there, but Higgs was dead asleep until he heard their footsteps. They were both too tired to care about Scorpius when his father was obviously awake and waiting for his missing students to return to the house, and even Higgs assumed they’d already been scolded and would tell him about it in the morning before promptly rolling over back to sleep.

They found Scorpius the next morning when the Giant Squid came by their window and roared loudly under the water. This was standard practice for the squid who was either enchanted or simply smart enough to know how to, every morning at seven, be a bother. The rumbling echo woke the dormitory up as usual, and laying face-down on his bed and still fully dressed, was Mister Malfoy.

"No... I swear, I only just got to bed...!" He wailed, dark circles under his eyes as Arthur pointed out how at least he didn't have to fuss about getting dressed for lessons.

"Where'd you vanish off to yesterday?" Higgs was the one to question him. Italy and Arthur had a hell of a time trying to position themselves inconspicuously so Italy could test his wounded arm and see how much it had healed during the night. "These two came back, but I didn't hear you at all."

"Gamp and I-" he cut himself off with a jaw-breaking yawn. "The owlery. We were there all bloody night..."

"What?"

"Why the owlery?"

"That's where she goes to when she's not crying her eyes out in Moaning Myrtle's toilet." Scorpius might have been in better spirits if he'd had a chance for proper sleep, but between a Quidditch match the day before and staying out all night in the cold, he was barely able to put his bag on the right way and got turned around twice just trying to find his way up to the great hall. "She's got all them school owls completely trained to eat out of her hand you know? It's actually really cool how she just whistles and one of them comes down to perch next to her."

"She trains owls?" Italy asked.

"Hers does little tricks if you offer it half a mouse." He groaned, "It'll croon a few bars of a song and bob its head three times for a whole one."

Gamp was already in the great hall when the four of them arrived, and Arthur found it curious how her eyes seemed to bug right out of her head when she saw Italy, but then flickered to Scorpius like
she didn't know if she should stay or flee.

It didn't really matter either way however, because just as they were approaching their seats Arthur felt a choking tightness close around his throat and a force grabbed the back of his robes and dragged him back. His shoes skidded back and his centre of balance was ripped away like a kitten caught by the scruff. The only thing that made it bearable was the gag next to him as Italy flailed just as violently and they were both ripped back across the whole length of the great hall where the spell dropped them both flat on their backs.

And, of course, the first thing they saw was Professor Malfoy, resplendent and pristine in his white robes despite probably not getting more than an hour or two of sleep, glaring down at them from above.

"Kirkland. Vargas."

"Professor Malfoy."

"Good morning, Professor."

"Stand up and come with me."

"Of course, Professor."

"Yes, Professor."

So much for breakfast, because they were set marching behind Professor Malfoy like the guilty children they were and Arthur couldn't help but fling an accusing look at Italy for dragging him into this. Friend or no, he certainly hadn't signed up for a scolding.

They climbed three flights of stairs to bring them up to the fourth floor, meaning they were going into the infirmary and had to suffer with the sound of the white doors automatically swinging open and then gliding shut behind them. They walked down the entire length of the hospital wing, approached a tall, narrow door in the back end next to a large bookshelf that seemed stuffed with hospital records, and passed through into a wide open office. Professor Malfoy's office.

Oh yes, they were in deep trouble now.

Professor Malfoy's office had four tall windows that reached up the circular walls, implying that this was the rounded half-tower protruding from the fourth floor and visible from the flying fields. Instead of facing the door, his desk was long and semi-circular, looking at the walls and windows with a simple high-backed chair facing the door so he could enter and exit the space at once.

The walls between the windows were covered in shelves bearing vials and bottles, flasks and flagons, boxes and jars and all sorts of other containers. There was a sickly-sweet smell that came from looking up at the garden of herbs, dry and fresh, either growing from hanging pots or suspended from strings hanging from the rafters of the conical tower. The wide wall behind them was bricked with books, wizarding medical texts and catalogues of potions and plant life organized by colour and size instead of names or numbers. Wizards really weren't the sort for muggle organization, the Professor's mind probably performed better with the tactile nature of "the green book of potions" than "One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore". The great green rug spread across the floor, Arthur noticed now, was blazed with the silver crest of Slytherin. He wasn't house head for nothing.

"Before I take an additional twenty points from Slytherin this morning," The Professor brought them into his office and his hand immediately came up, fingers snapping when the two boys halted and
watched an ounce of wandless magic make a brass tray leap up from its neat spot on one of the shelves and zip over to him. It stopped at once and with his wand the professor flicked and swished several times to bring a handful of herbs and one of those mysterious bottles hovering down to land on another tray that rose to catch them. "Vargas, show me your arm."

Italy was utterly obedient to the demand. He didn't have a bag or a wand to mind as he pulled his robe off this morning, and through the nipping anxiety Arthur noticed him staring intently at something on the desk. Yes, that definitely looked like a wand case and a Slytherin robe.

He undid the button on his cuff and rolled up his sleeve, the bandages from last night still wrapped around his arm but not as tightly anymore. Professor Malfoy had flicked his wand in the direction of a previously unseen cauldron - they'd missed it because a bookshelf had to shift out of the way of the fireplace entrance and a crackle of sparks got the fire going, mixed and measured ingredients quickly passing from the professor's hands through the air to tip into the vat as it began to heat up.

"And who did this?" Professor Malfoy was referring to the gauze, and Arthur clasped his hands behind him at parade stance, feet apart and shoulders dropped back before answering.

"I did, sir."

"Mister Kirkland, were you not told to bring Mister Vargas directly to me if you found him yesterday?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Then that will be five points from Slytherin for your disobedience." Arthur closed his eyes at the sting, but at least his was only mental when he heard Italy suck in a breath beside him.

Italy's burns looked much better today than they had last night. There was a suspicious layer of dead skin across the back of his hand and fingers where he'd healed the fastest, and probably the same along his upper arm, but enough damage remained to show how hot the flames had been yesterday. His forearm was completely red, one or two of the blisters still furious and tight beneath his elbow as the Professor tsked sharply.

"And I have to wonder, Mister Vargas, what you thought the pain was worth when you could have simply returned to the dorms or arrived here in the infirmary for immediate care."

"It... is difficult to explain, sir."

"And the pain is punishment enough for it. However, you both managed to sneak back into Slytherin House last night, I'm still removing ten points from each of you for the stunt." So, a total of twenty-five points gone just from the two of them, never mind whatever Gamp and Scorpius had also lost. Not a good day for Slytherin. "I'll also inform you that Miss Jordan and the other Mister Weasley are both doing just fine after the hexing you gave them yesterday. Your detention for fighting in the halls will be served up here this evening with me. Kirkland, you may return to the great hall for breakfast."

"Can he stay?" Italy piped up with a sudden tremble in his voice. Professor Malfoy's spell dropped something into the boiling cauldron that made it give a loud gush of grey steam and belch out green sparks.

Professor Malfoy, now that he was finished scolding, was already loosening up as he checked the brew and answered the question in an off-hand manner.

"If he would like, but he's free to go."
Italy looked at Arthur, and despite how much trouble he'd gotten himself into yesterday just by being alone, Arthur wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

"Nah, I'm hungry."

"What-?"

"See you in Herbology, one hour remember?"

"Wait- Kirkland!"

It served Italy right having to deal with the suspiciously blue substance Professor Malfoy was ladling out of the cauldron as Arthur left. After all, if he didn't go back and return Gamp's wand, who would? People in their year really needed to learn not to misplace them so much.

And to stop getting into so much trouble, but Arthur really wasn't in a position to complain so much about that now, was he?

What happened in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom was dealt with by Ellie in a quiet voice after the end of Herbology that morning in February.

"I'm sorry." She whimpered. "I'm really, really sorry for yelling like that, I-"

Feliciano's best idea was to just toss his arms around her in a hug, laughing about how she was being silly and he wasn't mad at her at all! He'd been worried!

"And I don't think the ghost likes me."

"Myrtle? I don't know what you mean, she's usually so nice." She invited him to go back and Feliciano had to refuse, regretting his choice of words when it sounded like a rejection of being around her instead of him just not wanting to be around ghosts. Even England dimmed when reminded of the young girl whose spirit haunted the school's plumbing.

"What about your owls?" He suggested instead, and watched Ellie's grey eyes go wide and then dart around trying to look anywhere but at him. Her shoes fidgeted on the damp grass outside the greenhouses, the two of them hanging back while the other Slytherins move on to their next class.

"Scorpius... told you about that..."

"He did! He said it's amazing and you can get the owls to dance and hoot for you!"

"N-No, I just know their names."

"Then let's all go to the owlery together tonight after dinner!"

He knew he pushed it, he knew he laughed and pretended not to hear her, but in the end she still agreed and Feliciano was able to drag her happily along to their next class.

As soon as they entered the charms classroom, Feliciano walked with her over to the desk where England was already waiting, and then abruptly changed sides and plopped down at the empty desk where Ellie was usually left to be paired with a random Hufflepuff classmate.

England didn't say anything about it while Feliciano pulled out his book, some fresh parchment and a
quill along with his restored wand. He did eventually pipe up though and tell Ellie to just come and sit down already so they could get started before the Professor arrived.

It was his first time sitting through a lesson without either England or Scorpius beside him, and it was admittedly a little uncomfortable to work with the occasional dismissive huff from his partner who just looked him up and down and rolled his eyes. How rude!

They were half-way through the lesson when Feliciano worked his way through a chink in the Hufflepuff's determined armor.

"That was really close! How about you try-"

"Listen, Snakeskin, I don't need your help with this."

Thank you.

"Snakeskin?" He repeated loudly, not angry at all and he made sure his tone reflected that! "No no no! My name is Feliciano!" He said it as loud as he could without shouting, effectively quieting the murmur of students trying to get their cups of water to froth up without actually touching the beads of soap at the bottom. "A silly mistake but I can see how you'd make it: Snakeskin, Feliciano, mm! Yes, very similar!"

"Is there an issue, Mister Vargas?" Professor Flitwick called, and he turned a beaming smile on the professor who was curiously watching the exchange from his perch atop a stack of books.

"No no no, Professor! My partner and I just forgot to introduce ourselves before we started today!" And then he turned on the disgraced little boy sitting next to him. "So, my name's Feliciano, what's yours?"

"Mm-"

"Mm? I don't know that name! Is it very English? My mother tongue is Italian you see, so..." He trailed off with the expectation that the boy would open his mouth and speak, and a quick glance at Professor Flitwick showed the Deputy Headmaster standing with his hands clasped in front of him, an expectant look on his face when the Hufflepuff boy looked at him for help and received none.

"Cat got your tongue, Mister Baker?"

"David..." He finally squeaked, the whole class watching before he turned around again to look at Feliciano, who was still smiling, and then summed up whatever manners he'd been raised with and offered his wandless hand for a shake. "David Baker."

"Pleasure to work with you, David." And Feliciano shook his hand enthusiastically, twisting back around in his seat and picking his wand back up before staring down into their shared wooden cup. "Let's try again! This is a useful spell for stirring tea too, isn't it? Do you like tea, David? All the English kids in Slytherin just love it but I miss espresso like we have in Italy!"

Professor Flitwick went back to monitoring his lesson, the other students drifted back to their charms, and no one whispered the word "snakeskin" for the rest of that morning.

The afternoon was something else entirely, because Feliciano couldn't remember a single date for the test they wrote. To make up for it, he scribbled an extra page of parchment on the back of the essay portion explaining briefly how the same issue of hoop skirts and cauldron fires had been dealt with in Italy. He then scratched out his name every time it showed up in the essay and scribbled "England" on top, hoping for the best.
Potions was a lot like Herbology had been that morning, meaning Feliciano was flat-out ignored and then blatantley whispered about for the entire lesson by their Gryffindor classmates. The difference here was that he kept up his efforts to let Ellie get a solid day of not being the Slytherin class's spare-wheel and was left, after a rude best-four-out-of-seven draw between Gryffindor wands, paired with a sulky Rose Weasley over a cauldron and set of ingredients.

"Your stupid fight," she hissed at him, unscrewing a jar of spider legs and shaking far too many onto the brass scales she hogged on her side of the cauldron, "Cost Gryffindor fifty points yesterday."

"I made the first strike, not the first move," he whispered back, not even bothering to try and help make the potion because she was too angry to let him within six inches of the cauldron's edge. "Would you be this angry if my robes were blue? Or yellow?"

Rose slammed the thick glass bottle she was holding on the table, cracking it so hard that for the second time that day Feliciano found himself the centre of (almost) everyone's attention.

"But that's just it!" She was so angry over something that had nothing to do with her directly. "They aren't blue, or yellow, or red. You don't belong with smart Ravenclaws or nice Hufflepuffs or brave Gryffindors, you're just as much a snake as the rest of the Slytherins!"

"Do you think you're brave for acting like this, Miss Weasley?" England's voice spoke over his shoulder and where Feliciano expected to find him and Scorpius standing at his back, it was England and Ellie. "For causing another scene? The way I heard it told, Vargas took down three Gryffindors on his own before managing to get away. What were they-? Jordan, another Weasley and-?"

"Mention my cousin Louis again, Kirkland and I'll give you a black eye."

"Vargas already did that to Potter!" Higgs chimed in, footsteps stomping as he came up behind the group, Scorpius probably with him too. "Or did you break his jaw instead?"

"Don't." When he saw Albus Potter come up to join his cousin and defend his brother, Feliciano tried to turn off the angry burn growing in his gut and kept his fingers flat and rigid at his side. He would not lash out again, he absolutely refused to let another fight break out even with so much tension ripping the classroom apart.

"Who's joining Creevey's tournament?" He said loudly, raising his voice again, but this time he didn't try to laugh and smile through the anger, he just spoke and kept speaking. "House against house, wand against wand! Plenty of spells and no one gets in trouble for it either!"

"Slytherin's a shoe-in to win!" England announced, singing a different tune in front of Weasley now that he was angry and not as level-headed. "Especially if the Gryffindors are too scared for a bit of sport."

"I'm in!" A Gryffindor girl with braided yellow hair announced, standing up behind her cauldron. There was a ruckus in the desks behind Feliciano before he heard two girls, Finnick and her friend, pipe up in the back.

"The winner gets a hundred points for their house, consider us both in!"

"I don't even need the points." Rose Weasley growled, staring right through him and then glaring at England where he had his arms folded briskly in front of him to Feliciano's left.

"I'm in too!" Albus answered.

"And me!" Scorpius.
It was just a chorus of yelling after that, seven Slytherins to ten Gryffindors making pledges and boasts.

"In what?" Until a loud, low voice broke through and they all turned to see Professor Slughorn struggling to get to his feet from the chair he'd fallen asleep reclined in about fifteen minutes ago. "Whoosit-? What's going on! Getting into what now? What trouble? Everyone, return to your cauldrons please! Don't let those antidotes burn! Ten points for every expertly prepared antidote, children, doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Professor!" Rose Weasley chimed as their classmates began to turn away and shuffle back to their places. The murmuring voices didn't stop Rose from turning to face Slughorn like a proper little student and raising a hand despite already standing and being clearly visible. "I refuse to share my points with Vargas."

"You refuse?" Slughorn repeated, dumbfounded, and Feliciano rolled his eyes at the petty declaration. "Well that's fine then, no points for you at all then. Who's ready then? None of you? Well hurry up now we've only got another ten minutes!"

At dinner that night Feliciano didn't eat more than few bites of anything, less willing than usual to put up with the bland British food offered at the school and not satisfied with the raw flavours of pork and potato or the fruits and sweets that came later.

He didn't get a break after the meal either, because while England and the other Slytherins went to put their names down for the Defense Against the Dark Arts' professor's tournament, Feliciano broke away and hurried to the fourth floor where Professor Malfoy and his detention assignment for the fight were waiting.

Inside, he found Professor Creevey, Professor Longbottom, and Professor Malfoy having a stand-off in the middle of the infirmary. He slipped inside without being seen or heard over the three men speaking loudly at each other and hid behind one of the white curtains between the beds.

"Four Gryffindors to one and you expect me to believe that-"

"Why would he even be near Gryffindor tower in the middle of the afternoon and how dare you-"

"Gentlemen!" Feliciano had to admit his mood improved a little hearing Professor Creevey, an energetic and friendly Wizard, raise his voice.

Creevey was one of the few house-blind teachers Feliciano had met. He was always sunshine and smiles while telling them the best way to hold their wand in an encounter, or where to fire at a troll versus a dragon to buy themselves the most time to escape. Professor Creevey's golden rule of facing down magical creatures was to do whatever would give you the most time to escape. He didn't advocate killing Vampires or Werewolves or exercising evil spirits, he took the defense part of his title very seriously and taught them the best way to get away from dangerous things.

But he also didn't hesitate to get between two outraged warlocks, because there was a heavy weight of magic saturating the air even from Feliciano's hiding place. The two house heads hadn't pulled their wands, but they were mad.

"First of all," Professor Creevey began, "the tournament isn't until the start of May, so I don't know what either of you are going on about. Second-"

"Dennis, this-"
"Second, Professor Longbottom, I teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Not you, or you, Draco. I teach it. I teach the disarming spells, the shield charms, the leg locks, the techniques, the drills, the theories, all of it. I teach that, not you, therefore I will judge who competes, not you two."

"Students who go around picking fights in the halls-"

"Should be given an opportunity to fight in a safe, controlled environment where they can be monitored and educated!" As much as Professor Longbottom sounded like he had more to say, once Professor Creevey started he hit his stride and just kept going: "And Neville, you're my friend but that's a dangerous argument to make about Vargas, especially where James Potter is concerned. Who do you really think started that mess last night? Be honest with yourself."

"Yes, Longbottom, be honest."

"Put a sock in it, Malfoy."

"He's a bit of a dick." Creevey chirped. "I'll say it for you because we all know it and it won't leave this room: but he's a bit of a dick, Neville be honest."

"James Potter is the son of one of the bravest heroes this school and all of Britain has ever known."

"And he knows it." Professor Malfoy barely factored into the conversation anymore, it was Creevey who moaned the words and Feliciano could practically see him rocking on his heels, hands stuffed down his robes as the three of them had a chat that probably belonged in the staff room. "He knows it, Neville, and he's brilliant, but he knows it. There's almost no one who comes close to bringing him down a peg and doesn't that sound like someone we used to know?" Feliciano didn't understand that comment, or the long pause in the conversation. "Eh, Draco? Sound familiar? Even a little bit, Mister Malfoy? Rich boy, stellar marks, Quidditch star and all that?"

"Put a sock in it, Creevey."

"Alright, I've made my point and that's all I wanted. So stop fighting, you two. Don't- I mean, don't become friends or anything because that'd just be weird but- stop bickering! It's not like either of you to act like that. The tournament's my headache and you're both forgetting the most important thing: Vargas is in second year, Potter is in third, so even if they both sign up there's no way for them to fight each other!"

"I'm going to hold you to that, Creevey."

The conversation was winding down when Feliciano made a very gutsy decision and darted back to the door, slipping through as fast and quiet as he could and holding his breath in the hall just in case he'd been caught. When no voices shouted for him, he felt safe enough to relax, and stayed outside until the infirmary doors opened a minute later with Professors Longbottom and Creevey standing there looking surprised to see him.

Exactly the reaction he'd wanted.

"Professor Creevey! Professor Longbottom!" He greeted, putting on a sunny smile.

"Vargas." Longbottom seemed a lot less comfortable with the greeting than Creevey, the Defense teacher smiling with his curly blond hair cut in a round shape over his ears, deep laugh lines around his square jaw and blunt chin. He had happy green eyes and was, possibly, one of Feliciano's favourite teachers. He was certainly one of the fairest in terms of points and expectations.

"Put your name down for the tournament yet, Mister Vargas?" Creevey asked, and Feliciano
understood the exasperation that flashed on Longbottom's face.

"Not yet, sir. Tonight, if I can, but tomorrow morning for sure!" He hadn't had to talk to Creevey specifically about it and his nerve hadn't found a reason to fail him.

The professors left shortly after. The sparse conversation was killed when they confirmed that he was there to serve detention. He slipped back into the infirmary as soon as they were gone and Professor Creevey's voice faded down the corridor as he chattered happily to Longbottom.

"Back again, Mister Vargas?" Professor Malfoy was standing in his usual place in the middle of the infirmary, arms folded and a hard, brittle line carved across his face instead of a mouth. His grey eyes, however, seemed cheerful.

"Sir?"

"Do you make a habit of sneaking in and out of professors' conversations, Vargas?" Oh crap- "I don't think either of them saw you, but this is my infirmary, and I miss nothing."

There was a soft squeaking noise somewhere behind him that made Feliciano jump, spin around and see nothing, then look back at the professor when he chuckled softly.

"Check your bag."

Feliciano looked down and saw a pair of beady black eyes staring up at him, dark brown iri hidden in the dark depths fringed with soft white fur and a long nose tipped with a pink, snuffling end. The animal sitting in the space between his textbooks had tiny little ears, stubby paws, and an unusually long body until he realized what it was: a ferret.

"Come, come." The Professor stated, still smiling as with another squeak the ferret planted its stubby paws on the edge of Feliciano's history of magic text book and heaved its smooth white body out of the bag, dropping gracelessly to the floor before it rolled around and then quickly scampered up to the professor. Its little claws found holds in his white robes as it climbed straight up to his shoulders and draped itself behind his neck, nose snuffling happily at his ear and cheek before Professor Malfoy stroked the animal to calm it down.

"You have a pet!" Feliciano gasped, confused that he'd never heard or seen it before!

"Yes, a gift from Longbottom unfortunately." The kind way Professor Malfoy was scratching the ferret's neck undermined the disdainful way he said the words. "Usually she sleeps in the dormitory, but yesterday I had her out looking for you." And maybe that explained why Professor Malfoy was fine keeping his business up on the fourth floor instead of somewhere closer to the Slytherin common room. Between the secret passage just outside the infirmary door and his familiar nesting somewhere in the common room, he was as good as already in the room.

"Does she have a name?"

"Bella." Aah!

"What a perfect name for such a beautiful animal! I didn't think you'd choose something in Italian!"

The professor looked wildly confused for a second after Feliciano gave his praise, it made him quickly listen to his own words again to see if he'd said something wrong, but he couldn't pick up on it. Finally, professor Malfoy smiled again and the moment passed.

"I suppose it does mean something in Italian, doesn't it?" Watching something pass between wizard
and familiar, Bella the ferret slid down her master's robes with a happy squeak and immediately shuffled across the polished stone floors past Feliciano towards the doors. "But since I've answered your question, won't you answer one of mine?"

"Of course, Professor." Letting the strap of his bag off his shoulder so it could rest on the floor, for detention so far this wasn't so bad and he clasped his hands behind his back, shoulders dropped and feet comfortably spread.

"Vargas..." He heard the sound of the doors locking and then another happy coo from the ferret as it scrambled across the floor and then came slipping by on its belly to hide under the hem of Professor Malfoy's robes. "I understand your brother's name is Lovino Vargas. I assume that means he's named after your father?"

Ah... Feliciano had forgotten that he was supposed to be waiting for this question.

"Mm, yes Professor, it's the same name." And the same person, but he couldn't go getting into that could he? "My family has a long history of duelling."

"And your father brought that name to the entire world during the war... Is that how a thirteen-year-old boy like yourself can supposedly redirect spells?"

Feliciano just... smiled. It was wrong to be proud of himself for hitting children with their own jinxes, but it had been wrong of them to attack him in the first place. His reaction seemed good enough for Professor Malfoy anyways.

"Are you ready to begin then?"

"Begin?" Feliciano watched Professor Malfoy's wand appear in his hand and then swish in a complex series of circles, white lines cutting themselves across the floor to form a long rectangular box around the both of them, just over half the length of the infirmary and about seven feet wide. Shimmering half-walls of light rose up to the ceiling, and then they crept across to seal them in a full box. Another flick of the Professor's wand, and Feliciano's book bag was swept away out of the box and under one of the infirmary beds.

"Mister Vargas, I will not have you perpetuating the stereotype that Slytherins get into fights only to back out and run away half-way through. Outmatched or not, we always retain our dignity."

"Yes, Professor."

"Draw your wand."

Feliciano did as he was told, a nagging bit of anxiety biting the back of his neck while a familiar warmth crept up from his right hand. It was hard to ignore the quiet whisper from the rod between his fingers, the power wrapped up inside, and when Professor Malfoy bowed Feliciano mimicked him, his mind beginning to unfold with spells and ideas. All the while of course, the anxiety was there telling him not to dare use something to outrageous. What had Professor Creevey been trying to teach them this week?

"Begin."

Professor Malfoy took first strike and it stopped Feliciano's thoughts when a pink leg-log jinx came screaming at him through the air. His stance immediately corrected itself, right leg forward and weight shifted back, right hand slashing up through the air to catch the enchantment by the tip of his wand, wind-milling back to slam it to the floor before the bright green of a laughing charm launched off his wand with the follow-through swing.
He didn't see what Professor Malfoy countered with because the two spells collided with a loud crack and a burst of silver sparks. Right when he thought there would be a pause for instruction, a bright flash of light came screaming at him and training he'd half-forgotten a life time ago made him jump back and reverse his stance, wand raised defensively and sweeping around to catch the new spe-

Another one right behind it, flying low and without the bright light and colour of a pesky jinx snared his left ankle where it was out in front, ripping his shoe back and off the floor with his ankle and leg right behind it. He slammed his elbow in the floor trying to protect his face and felt the intense heat of the spell he'd caught overwhelming the wand. It shot a crippling pain down his arm until he released his grip to make the spell stop.

He punched the floor hard, bruising his wand-hand to dispel the painful enchantment before the snare trap relented. Instead of lying there for a break, he was back up with his left hand wrapped around his stinging wrist, the burns from yesterday mostly gone but still sensitive around his elbow where so much movement was agitating them.

"You recover quickly, Vargas."

"One more round!"

"Your wand can only carry one spell at a time. If redirection is your only defense then you won't last long in Creevey's tournament."

"One more!"

The dust and smoke of the collision was fading, and through it as Professor Malfoy swished his wand to blow the veil away, Feliciano could see a smile.

The pain in his hand started going away, a simple bruise a small thing that healed easily and would be gone before the match was over. Bringing his stance back up properly, Feliciano nodded to show he was ready.

Shield charms were cropping up in his mind, deflection, absorption, repellants- but they were all old spells that Creevey hadn't come close to showing them yet, how would he explain them? He had to just stop worrying about it as Professor Malfoy's wand dipped low and arced back up, a dark green ribbon blooming from the tip before he whipped his wand forward and the spell took form.

It was thick and heavy, dark green with very real weight to it. Feliciano heard himself swear when the body of a long viper uncurled itself from the ribbon and began slithering, quickly, straight for him.

A blast-back charm to blow the creature away from him was dodged by its sleek body, Felicaino firing a stunning spell before it swerved around that too and half his distance and time to act were both gone.

"Think faster."

He was thinking, he was thinking but every spell was too strong and he struck them all down, struck like-

Struck.

Lightning!
"Vargas..."

He pulled his wand back when the snake reared up and hissed loudly, water jetting from the tip only to be caught in the fast stirring motion Flitwick had made them practice. A orb of rapidly spinning water formed next to him and he spun it faster than the shape could handle, lashing it forward and focusing completely on keeping the water from splashing everywhere. Instead, it split evenly in half in two thin arms of cold, frothing white liquid and attacked.

One struck the floor when the snake dodged, but the other cracked down straight on its head to stun it briefly. It was close enough to lunge for him and Feliciano's wrist snapped his wand high over his shoulder and then down in a rapid zig-zag.

"Coruscantis!"

A loud bolt of heat burnt straight down from his shoulder and out his fingertips before the wand refined the energy into a seamless stream of electricity. The snake leapt right into it, fangs bared, and was vaporized instantly.

The electricity then shot along the water on the floor, cracking and screaming as it filled the air with blinding light and then vanished with a fateful boom.

The first thing Feliciano was able to hear again over the lingering roar and the sound of his own heavy breaths, was Professor Malfoy's slow, approving applause.

"Quite impressive, Mister Vargas." The white walls protecting the infirmary from their duel were beginning to fade, winking out of existence with bits of stardust sprinkled through the air to show where they'd been hanging. "I was beginning to wonder if I wouldn't need the anti-venom after all."

The fight was over, the threat was gone, and Feliciano's knees went weak before the rest of him just plopped straight down on the floor, shaking a little bit and looking for his breath. Professor Malfoy's wand was already cleaning up the water as he crossed the floor to reach him, saying something thanking Flitwick for a surprisingly useful charm. By the time he was standing directly over Feliciano, his young body was screaming for sleep, and there was a wonderful feeling of his adult mind being well worked from the exercise.

It wasn't very nice having to stuff the most useful spells he'd ever learned in a box and label them do not touch because of this mission. He hadn't even been allowed to cancel Professor Malfoy's spell before it was finished...

"That's enough for tonight." The professor offered him a hand to help him stand up and Feliciano accepted it, surprised when a floating tray holding a ceramic mug of hot cocoa floated down from somewhere unseen and was offered to him. Thrilled with a treat, he didn't mind at all when Professor Malfoy took his wand hand firmly and checked to see if he'd injured it badly enough to warrant healing. He hadn't. "However, I expect to see you at Duelling club meetings twice weekly from now until May, understood?"

"Mm- yes, sir." Feliciano was more interested in the chocolate drink, enjoying the invitation to sit on one of the beds with some of the day's homework while he sipped the creamy beverage and rounded out the hour of detention.

It was, in his exhausted mind, not a bad end to a long Monday afternoon.
After Arthur and Italy, who had an unfair advantage with such things, the best duellist in Second year was a bit of a surprise.

It wasn't Gamp, who lacked the self-confidence to strictly command her wand to attack and defend.

It wasn't Scorpius, who got too caught up in defending himself to ever launch a counter.

It was Higgs.

Higgs wasn't afraid of getting hurt, giving him the strength and stubbornness to simply stand there and hold his stance with spells flying straight at his face. He wasn't the fastest draw or the most skilled with his wand-work and skill repertoire, but he knew what spells worked and did he ever know how to conjure them.

"EX-Pelli-ARMUS!"

He very nearly broke Arthur's wand during a practice round in mid-March, either because screaming the spell at the top of your lungs really did make it stronger, or because Higgs had unlocked something in his gut that made them a hell of a lot stronger.

Higgs' enunciation was pristine. Giving him the active commitment of going to Duelling Club and getting a chance to pair up and aggressively face off against other students, Slytherin or not, brought a kind of focus to Charles Higgs that began boosting his marks in their casting classes over the course of second and third terms. It was actually quite good to see.

But the strongest duellist in Slytherin house, by a long shot, was still Italy.

It was damned annoying too because even with a sword he was usually better. He was Rome's grandson for goodness' sake, and there was nothing more dangerous than giving him war-games and pretend fights to show how much skill there was hiding under that dopey grin.

He was fast and he was small, receiving criticism from Professor Creevey at times for bouncing on the balls of his feet like a fencer instead of keeping a firmly rooted position like a duelling wizard. It was perhaps the only area of direct criticism where Professor Creevey fell flat, because the way he balanced himself made Italy that much harder to take down in a duel. He could swerve, bend, dip, jump and twist to avoid pretty much anything that wasn't otherwise deflected off his wand or snagged out of the air and flung back at the original caster.

He kept his spells elementary and limited the flourishes and strength of them- these bodies of theirs wore out too quickly otherwise, going all out would probably put them straight to sleep with the need to recharge. It was a mental exercise that had them both sleeping much better.

Arthur, meanwhile, absolutely despised the limits on his powers and was more than a little fed up waiting for May to hurry up and get here. His greatest distraction, as it had been all year, was the issue of Hogwarts' art-work.

Instead of letting Italy get caught again, Arthur was the one who made two more trips to the locked room after several more increasingly violent attacks were made on more picture frames. Just like when Italy had visited them in February, by April every dead piece of art had an Italian name scratched on the back, and they all looked like someone had been desperately trying to claw their way through them.
The most curious thing about them now, as well, was that while every single attack had been accompanied by a scream, the school was beginning to buzz now about the fact that, regardless of who the painting's subject was, the scream always belonged to a woman...

Sadly, all of that had to be set aside once May finally approached, because three whole months of anticipation somehow hadn't put the fear of a good fight into Italy. He was absolutely determined to follow through with his private and vengeful plan to the school that unwarranted attacks on Slytherin students would no longer be tolerated.

And Arthur, because of his own damned temper, was obligated to join the tournament with him on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.

That was Creevey's entire purpose behind having the tournament: the Battle. It was in fact an annual event at Hogwarts beginning with his first year as Professor, but had been cancelled last year for-well, precisely the same reason that Arthur and Italy were even in attendance now.

What they were simply unable to work out, no matter how much they pestered Zabini or the hints they dropped around professors, was why Creevey had felt the need to suspend his successful duelling tournament on the twenty-year anniversary of the war's end and the first anniversary of the double suicide that had brought the inquiry to Hogwarts.

It just didn't make sense.

It meant that instead of becoming irrelevant, the cancelation was something that started eating away at Italy almost as badly as the anticipation for the tournament.

The Battle of Hogwarts had largely been won by the student population of the school, and the members of Dumbledore's Army: the force which Professors Longbottom and Creevey both had fat Galleon coins from. That was why the duelling club was so important, and why the tournament even included invitations for parents and veterans to come visit the school just before exams and watch the students face off in friendly competition. These were the skills that had defended the school and stopped the Dark Lord's campaign, and they deserved reverence and celebration.

Or, in Italy's case:

"No! I am not coming to your stupid-ass waste of time-!" so on and so forth with the Saturday morning post before a bubbling ceramic dish of crab and ricotta cannelloni was deposited in front of Italy. He even received a freshly baked loaf of bread to tear apart and help him eat his merry way through the delicacy.

"So, I take it he isn't coming?"

"Nope." But Italy really didn't seem upset, he was more worried about not burning his tongue just with the metal edge of his spoon because the meal was still steaming from the oven that had cooked it. "He's in London, but he's busy with work in your brother's office." Ignoring the fact that Scotland had already politely agreed, so long as they maintained the foster-child story so he could explain his lack of aging one way or another to the veterans tomorrow.

"Better enjoy that meal, Vargas, it might be your last!" Charles was absolutely bursting at the seams getting ready for today, clapping Italy hard on the shoulders so he almost choked around a bite of bread and creamy sauce. The larger boy dropped himself onto the seat to Italy's left and had a copy of the Daily Prophet that he dropped on the table, causing Scorpius to stand up a little from across a platter of eggs to get a look at it.
"That the article about the Tournament?" Scorpius asked, reaching a hand over his breakfast. "Give it here, I'll read it."

And he did. A bit of riff-raff about the pageantry of the event and the exclusive nature of the invitations: only the parents and guardians of students were to be in attendance, excluding higher beaurocrats from the Ministry and perhaps even the Minister of Magic himself.

"Preliminaries are today, are you lot ready?" Charles's thick face was beaming, Arthur had thought Quidditch was his calling after the way he'd helped train Scorpius to a painfully narrow defeat against Ravenclaw a week earlier, but obviously it was duelling. There was a healthy pink glow in his pale cheeks and a light in his eyes that was unfamiliar and much appreciated. "Only two people from each house and each year get to compete tomorrow. Professor Malfoy gets to judge us too so there'll be no funny business with the numbers."

"It's a panel, Charles." Scorpius corrected, handing back the newspaper and finishing off his breakfast without really minding the conversation. Gamp was the one to pick up on the issue first where she was sitting next to him. Arthur almost didn't hear her question:

"You're thinking about the game again, aren't you?"

"I was so close!" A groan from the three of them sitting across from him didn't stop Scorpius from going into the same rant he'd been on all week. "I could feel the damned snitch between my fingertips and then that bludger-"

"You're just lucky the Professor managed to put your leg back together," Arthur scoffed.

"No, I'm lucky he agreed not to tell mum he had to put my leg back together," was the sulking answer.

Arthur didn't see Italy's wand until he'd already let a curse off the end, because Scorpius' lips were abruptly glued shut and he ended up smacking his own face with an apple when his jaw didn't automatically open.

"No Quidditch before noon, I warned you."

"Mmm!!"

"Vargas..." Even though she was sitting right next to him, Gamp tried getting Italy's attention instead of helping Scorpius where the other boy had fire in his eyes and was fumbling to get his wand out. "Err, Feli..." Thankfully, once Scorpius had his wand he just sat there defeated because he couldn't say the spell to unstick his mouth. It was Higgs who offered help. The nations were watching Gamp. And she seemed to notice that it wasn't just Italy paying attention but Arthur as well, because Gamp squirmed rather hard on her seat with Arthur watching. She calmed down a little when he pretended to be more interested in Higgs' warning that the counter-curse might turn Scorpius' face blue if he did it wrong.

"Are you sure you're alright with your brother not coming?"

"Ve~? Of course! It's nothing to worry about, Ellie, he's very busy you know!"

"It just seems like he's always busy." A fair observation, but one that seemed to trouble her a bit too much as she pointed it out. "He's as close as London but he still won't come up to watch you compete. I thought your family was really big into duelling?"
"We have a legacy, but my brother isn't into that kind of thing anymore."

Breakfast ended with Gamp excusing herself despite the dangers of going alone, and Arthur pulling out his wand to help set Scorpius' mouth back in order and deal with the beard Higgs' sloppy wand work had painted down his irate little chin.

"I'll get you both for that, I swear it!"

"You'll get a chance to try at least." Higgs was confident, in fact he was down-right boastful and unusually friendly as a result. "No hard feelings after I pound you lot into the ground this afternoon, right?"

"All's fair, I don't mind." Arthur agreed, laughing a little with his chin resting on his palm.

"I've already decided I'm going to win, but let's stay friends!"

They sealed the agreement with synchronized wand waves that turned their pumpkin juice bright green, Scorpius quickly making a grab for Gamp's cup and adding it to the circle in case she came back.

They toasted, cheered, and drank down the goblets, chattering the rest of their morning away until it was time to clear out and make ready for the tournament.

"Second years first! Be aware that second years will be called upon first for their duelling! Then the third, fourth, fifth, and so on!" Outside the great hall was the only other ghost aside from Nearly Headless Nick that the Slytherins saw more than once a month by accident. The Fat Friar, Hufflepuff house ghost, seemed to feel rather safe fluttering around over the heads of students, a ghostly scroll unfurled in his hands where a much larger version of the same information was pegged to the stone wall behind him.

"The second-year competition will commence in one hour inside the Great Hall! Third years in two and a half hours, fourth years..." and so on and so forth. It would literally take all day for the preliminaries to get themselves over and done with, the real competition was tomorrow and that would be when everyone would gather to watch.

The Slytherin boys were outside under the May sunshine when Gamp caught up with them. Arthur flicked his wand to remove a few broken feathers from the hem of her robe that declared the fact that she'd been up in the owlery again as usual. None of them questioned what she'd been doing up there as it was her normal place to go when she wanted to be alone and didn't feel like putting up with the other Slytherin girls down in the dorms.

They practiced spells and Arthur eventually grew bored enough that he and Gamp settled down with weekend homework, but finally the bell for the competition started ringing and they, along with every other second year in the school, flooded back into the great hall.

There was also a suspicious number of first years.

"What are you lot doing down here?" Arthur questioned the three first year Slytherin girls sitting on one of the benches pushed right up against the wall on the Slytherin side of the hall. They were bouncing uncontrollably with hands clasped and faces grinning, but otherwise caused no harm. They didn't have to answer him because Arthur was only in second year, but their giggling annoyed him just the same.

The four tables were to be used as four platforms, the banner of each house hanging over their respective places while house heads stood and gave instructions. Headmistress McGonagall presided...
over the entire thing from the head table.

"Draw your wands and I will affix the charm." Professor Malfoy was saying. It was a charm that would assign the six assembled second years a colour so they knew who they would be fighting first. Arthur did a wild spin to try and find the seventh member of their year, and found Miss Finnick sitting with her arms crossed by the first years. She didn't seem interested in the least.

The tables had been covered in white clothes that had a rubbery texture to them, a much safer platform than the polished wood under clunky school shoes would have been. White curtains of protective magic were hovering in the air as well, meant to stop wayward curses or deflected spells from harming other competitors or audience members.

The rules were simple, combatants had to maintain a certain distance from each other, in their case that meant they couldn't leave the green section of the table cover on either end of the platform. There was enough available space to step away from an attack, but there would be no diving, rolling, or running permitted. They could use any combination of Hogwarts curriculum spells, but were instructed by Professor Malfoy to fight fairly.

With a flick of his wand, Arthur was given a pale blue light on the tip and quickly looked around to see-

"Oh, bollocks." -Italy standing next to him with a grin and an identical pastel glow on his wand too.

"It's better this way, Kirkland." Yes, it was, they'd already known they couldn't both represent Slytherin without some heavy explaining to do to the Headmistress, but Arthur had been hoping for something a bit less dramatic for his first round.

They weren't the first ones up, that privilege went to Gamp and Miss Flint who'd both drawn red. The four boys all cheered and clapped, but they couldn't actually say which one they wanted to win, although it should have been obvious.

Flint and Finnick probably weren't meant to be mean-spirited, but they certainly didn't like Arthur very much since he'd claimed half-blood status and preferred to spend their time with older Slytherin girls instead of the rest of their year. Flint was quite the tall girl, her skin milky to the point of looking swallow, and she had a perpetually unhappy face that made Arthur think of the pureblood family as a whole that had raised her.

"Bow, and begin!"

The girls bowed and Gamp looked like she was going to be sick, rolling her wand against her palm and breathing through her mouth.

"Damn, at least if it was one of us then she could have a bit of fun with it." Scorpius complained, his voice absolutely quiet so neither the Professor nor the second year Ravenclaws just next to them could hear what he said. Arthur hummed his agreement while Italy was focused solely on the match.

The match was over quickly. Gamp's charm misfired in a gush of smoke from her wand-tip and a harsh disarming spell from Flint sent the wand flying so far it nearly hit the head table.

"Excellent form, Miss Flint. You may take a seat, Miss Gamp."

Scorpius and Higgs were next, which led to several sharp volleys and even two connections: one a tap-dancing spell that got Higgs to jig around the table like he probably never had in his life, the other a laughing charm that filled the hall with the sound of Scorpius gasping uncontrollably trying to lift his wand again. He was disarmed after what looked like a salamander slithered out of his wand
and plopped in a daze to the floor, and was still giggling uncontrollably as he joined Finnick and Gamp on the bench next to the first years. At least he kept his spirits up.

"You're going to make me regret this." Arthur sighed, looking at Italy as they both climbed up to the table and took the steps made of several hovering books. Before they parted to reach their respective ends, Italy turned and offered him a smile and a genuine handshake.

"Second year spells only, remember?" What an awful person he was inside.

"I've got a new tax for your exports."

Italy went to his end laughing, and Arthur stomped onto the green part of the table and looked down at the Slytherin serpent blazed across the tarp. The hardest part of a formal wizarding duel was remembering not to charge your opponent, something Arthur found practically impossible after millennia of face-to-face combat. It was worse than fencing where you stopped every few strokes if there was a touch, so refined and restricted that it made his inner warrior struggle to stay back.

They were going to need a proper fight sometime over the summer to get it out of his system.

They bowed at Professor Malfoy's signal, and with ten yards between them, England took first strike.

A red stunning spell was launched off his arm and a jet of water from Italy's wand slashed through the air and disrupted the attack in mid-flight. Arthur's fingers twisted around his wand before he called on a leg-lock spell that would pin Italy's knees together.

A hiss and bang like a firework exploded next to his ear and the surging light of the sneaky spell blinded him, ears ringing as he forced his eyes open before they were focused and let a gout of red fire off his fingertips and out through the wand. He could physically feel the energy draining out of his shrunken body, flesh withering as it gave up life-force trying to propel magic that second years could know but would be damned if they could put this much power behind.

There was a metallic taste in the air before the rush of steam and more water. Arthur didn't know how Italy spun the water from his wand into two liquid arms, but they split around the fire to douse it from all sides and then kept going.

What he thought more fire was going to do against a wall of water half as tall as him was a mystery, but he did try and all at once Arthur was washed away in the surge and felt the table slip right out from under his feet.

He landed with a crash on the floor, soaking wet but otherwise unharmed, and was furious when he heard clapping from Professor Malfoy.

"I'm not even injured, you dolt!" Not the professor: Italy.

"You can't leave the platform!" Don't take that sing-song tone with him!

"Oh, I'll give you a platform!"

"That's enough, Kirkland. You can join the others and have them help you dry off." He was soaking wet and his shoes were full of water. Wizard games were awful things. Arthur hated the squelching sound he made as he walked over and sat himself squarely between Scorpius and Finnick. He hoped he dripped on them both.

Instead of a three-way match to decide the two who would move on for their year, the three remaining Slytherins drew lots again. The odd-colour-out was Italy, who sat back to watch Higgs
and Flint go head to head. The winner of their match was safe, the loser would face Italy as a last chance to redeem themselves and kick him out of the tournament.

"Are you alright?" Arthur asked, looking down at where Scorpius was doubled-over and still giggling hysterically under his breath. He couldn't even watch the match!

Whatever Flint said to Charles before their match got under the larger boy's skin, because he walked quite stiffly back to his end of the platform while she glided with her nose in the air to hers. When the Professor called for a bow, there was barely an incline of the head before they started.

And as children’s’ duels went it was a good round and longer in fact than Arthur's own match which left a sore spot on his pride. Neither of them knew how to deflect spells and the shield charm Flint cast around herself was weak and shattered after Higgs slammed it with a stunning spell, but they kept going.

And going, until Higgs pulled his arm around and belted out a curse so hard his face went red, a black ribbon shooting from his wand that formed a snake and immediately went zipping across the table. A Slytherin classic, that one. It was inscribed over the fireplace in the common room but no one ever really thought to try it out.

Flint obviously hadn't. The speed and aggression of the snake wasn't something most children could handle, and one fateful step back sent the young witch tumbling straight off the table with a shriek.

Professor Malfoy raised his wand and the snake was dispelled in a puff of black smoke, and Higgs puffed himself up to twice his normal size as he strutted down off the table.

Finnick slammed Arthur in the gut with her elbow, which was completely uncalled for as she hissed at him.

"That's a dirty trick your friend used!"

"It's the same rule that's got me sitting on this bench instead of Vargas." He huffed back, not in the mood to be picked on at all right now. He shook his dripping sleeve at her and got a disgusted screech out of the miserable child. She hissed 'half-blood!' like it meant something and Arthur went back to watching the competition.

Oh yes, wonder how pure-bloods like Malfoy, Higgs and Vargas could deign to speak with Arthur Kirkland. Go ahead, make his day. He simply wasn't in the mood for it.

But Miss Flint was in the mood to be treated kindly by Italy, who was standing beside her now where he'd helped her stand up and brush her robes off. He was chirping something foolish, probably trying to make her smile, and once it was clear that she was ready to go again, he offered a hand to help her climb the platform one more time.

On the other side of Scorpius, Gamp made an uncomfortable noise in the back of her throat and shifted heavily on her seat. Arthur looked down at Scorpius wondering if he wasn't kicking her by accident, and with a graceful push the other boy was sitting up with a proper, straight-forward look on his face.

"What have I missed then?" He asked in a rigid voice.

Arthur was about to answer, but Scorpius then promptly broke into a smile.

And put his head back between his knees when he started giggling all over again.
"Good God, man, how strong was that spell?"

If Arthur and Italy's match had been long, and Higgs and Flint's match had stretched beyond that, then it stood to reason that Italy and Flint would be up there all day on that table.

Instead, because Italy had first strike this time... It was over in under a minute after their bow.

"Are you ready, Bella?"

"My name is Gloria and yes I am!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"No but really, you fell so hard last time, are you sure you don't-?"

"Thank you, Vargas, but no!"

Gloria Flint made it half-way through his name before Italy thrust his wand forward and hers jumped out of her hand and went spinning through the air, ending the match at once. She'd broken her stance to scold him, and while there was silence from the Slytherin bench, a quick look at Professor Malfoy showed how damned hard he was trying not to break a smile and laugh like his son.

"Questionable strategy, Mister Vargas, but not against the rules either." Italy performed an accio spell on Flint's wand so he could hand it back to her, and then even continued his politeness streak by offering to help her down off the platform the same way he'd walked her up. The poor girl seemed absolutely torn apart trying to figure out whether to be mad at him or flattered.

"Congratulations to Mister Higgs and Mister Vargas, I'm sure you'll do Slytherin proud tomorrow. You're invited to sit and watch the rest of the preliminaries, but are otherwise free to go."

They did stick around for a little while, just long enough to catch a glimpse of Baker from Hufflepuff and then Rose Weasley and Albus Potter being cheered by the second year Gryffindors. The other houses had larger class sizes, so of course it took them a little longer to finish up.

"Wanna come back and watch Zabini compete?" Scorpius asked an hour later after the last of the jinx finally let him speak and breathe again. Italy was keeping hawk-eyes on James Potter high on the Gryffindor table while Finnick and Flint cheered for their third-year friends, but Arthur, who was getting bored, thought it was a fine idea.

With over a hundred house points riding on the competition's winner, who wouldn't want to come back and make sure their Head Boy made it to the finals?

May 2nd. Feliciano had been waiting for this: Hogwarts was buzzing, and the day after the preliminary matches he was one of the last people to wake up and climb the stairs to the Slytherin common room.

"What about your mom and dad?"

"Yes of course, they both know I'm in the tournament."

"Mine know I tried, I guess that's worth something."
Feliciano came upstairs to his friends talking at a small table about who would be in the audience today. Even from way down in the dungeons, there was a sense of activity and movement on the upper levels of the castle. Glancing out the window showed the Giant Squid pumping its massive body and rocketing one way under the lake, then looping back around a few minutes later. It was agitated by so many non-students already making their way into the castle.

Breakfast was served in the common room for once, and Professor Malfoy materialized at half-past ten to collect the Slytherin competitors. Feliciano and Higgs pulled away from their friends to join the professor with a wave. They left the dungeons accompanied girls and boys from the other years, including Head Boy Zabini at the front of the line representing seventh year along with one of the female prefects.

The second-year competition didn't mean much. The actual breakdown and delivery of the points was saved for when they reached a wide corridor off to the side of the great hall and tucked out of the way. Professors Longbottom, Flitwick, and a young, tall black sorceress in a blue and silver pantsuit whom Feliciano had only seen at the head table, never in a classroom, were all standing with the Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, and Hufflepuffs respectively.

Standing on a small square platform so he could be seen and heard by everyone, Professor Creevey had his hands behind his back and a smile on his square face, bouncing lightly on his toes where he was draped in bars of crimson and amber, edged in gold and flickering like a Christmas cracker in the sunlight. When he raised both hands for silence, the students obeyed and his grin got a little bigger.

"Congratulations! You've made it to this year's Duelling Tournament, and you've each represented your houses fairly. In a few minutes you will be instructed to enter the great hall in order from seventh to second years and shown to your seats. This is an eight-bracket tournament with three rounds.

"At the end of each round, the winner will be awarded five house points. The winner of the final match will earn points based on your year: ten for second year, fifteen for third, twenty for forth and so on, with the exception of seventh year." There was a long pause here in the explanation, Professor Creevey's eyes combing over the students and pausing eight times with a knowing smile that ignored house colours and just spoke of pride instead. "The prize for seventh year is one hundred house points."

There was more that Creevey had to say, and a lot of it clearly had meaning to him, but the most important part was when he finally spread his hands in front of him and fell silent, a growing noise beginning to build behind the wall in front of them, the great hall filling with applause and voices as parents and the rest of the students seemed settled into place.

The last thing Professor Creevey had to say to them was simple:

"Please, make Hogwarts proud."

He left first to go back into the great hall, and the four house heads put them into order lines and neat rows, seventh years leading but not before Zabini turned around to scold the fifth year Slytherins for both wearing an enchantment on their house badges that read "Down with Weasley! Go Zabini!"

They were on their way after that, and while they were walking one of the third years right in front of them hissed under her breath for Feliciano to take the false house badges she was dangling behind her. He and Higgs both took one, and with a grin and a quick tap with their wands fixed the badges to their robes. From a distance, no one would see the writing.
The Weasley clan was huge and they were all deeply loyal to Gryffindor. That meant that it didn't really matter which Weasley the badges referred to because excluding second year, there seemed to be a Weasley in every Gryffindor line-up.

The great hall was decorated in silver and gold streamers, the Hogwarts' crest taking the place of the four house flags along the spine of the long chamber while the four misplaced banners were pegged to the walls.

The tables were gone and over half the hall was taken up now by staggered bleachers. There were two extended platforms in the middle of the hall for two duels to take place at the same time, the sea of black school robes on one side and then parents on the other. There were no house divisions between the rows and rows of elaborately dressed wizards and witches, at least not formally: it was hard to find a robe that wasn't Gryffindor red, Hufflepuff yellow, Ravenclaw blue or Slytherin green, and for the most part they were segregated by colour.

It was impossible to miss the Weasley clan. Their order of appearance was the same as the house tables right to left: Slytherin then Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and finally Gryffindor. There were polite applause all around until the last house came, and then the Potter-Weasley clan exploded on the benches and the Gryffindor students on the other side of the hall started stomping their feet and cheering louder than the other three had bothered.

Feliciano's eyes scanned unfamiliar faces curiously, trying to follow where Higgs pointed and then waved claiming he could see his parents. He was pleased when he caught a familiar red-head in a dark green robe and white shoulder straps that made Scotland stand out regally in his flag's design but his brother's house colour, but when his eyes jumped to the next face Feliciano almost tripped and fell flat on the floor.

North Italy made eye-contact with South, who was sitting stiff and enraged on the bench next to Scotland, fixed up in a black robe with a tightly cinched neck. There was no colour or highlight to him, he was just an uncomfortable ball of hatred sitting right on the edge of the mass of red Weasley. As Feliciano tried to tug Higgs around so they could switch sides of the column, he caught his brother steadily beginning to lean away from the louder family. Scotland seemed to be saying something that Lovino, like a wet cat, had no interest in, but then there was a sharp jolt when their eyes met.

What was he doing here?

*Why was he here!*?

Was Feliciano happy? Was he scared? A bit of both actually but a lot more of the latter. It should have taken an act of god to bring Lovino to a magical place like this, dressed in a wizarding robe again and not firmly marching to get whatever he'd come here for.

Maybe their government was collapsing, or their neighbours were beginning to fight? Was the banking industry crumbling again and their exports were under threat of being shut down? Had the manufacturing sector-

"Vargas, are you alright?" Feliciano was so lost in his own fears that he almost walked right past his seat before Higgs took him by the back of his robes and dropped him down in his chair next to the duelling platform. "Oh God, not now! One of us is up first you know, don't blow it for Slytherin!"

Right- well, no actually. He wasn't doing this for points and just having Lovino in the crowd wasn't going to mess him up in a children's duel. It was the way Scotland ribbed Lovino with his elbow that made Feliciano calm down a little bit, because it broke the eye-contact between them so Lovino
could yell at Scotland to not touch him and then come back around with a proper glare.

He dragged his thumb horizontally across his throat and Feliciano made himself slump in his seat a little bit. At least *I'm going to kill you* was a better message to get than *we need to talk right-fucking-now*.

Charles Higgs was a lot of things, but he wasn't stupid.

"Who's that foul-looking wizard in the black robe?"

"My brother."

"I thought you said he wasn't coming?"

Feliciano sat up high enough to hiss back that the last he'd heard was the last everybody else had heard in that howler yesterday morning, but he was cut off by Professor McGonagall announcing from somewhere that they were ready to begin, and she called two second year names Feliciano didn't know to rise to the table. A Hufflepuff girl and the familiar form of Albus Potter both got up to cheers from their houses and families, and Higgs answered his name to hurry up alongside a Ravenclaw boy while the noise continued. Both sets of second years waited for Professor Creevey's signal, and began.

Feliciano didn't pay much attention because he could see the disturbed look on Lovino's face through the back and forth of curses. The matches were over quickly like most duels in younger years were meant to be: Higgs belted out a stunning curse that made the Ravenclaw boy seize up and tip over, and Albus Potter let off a very fast disarming charm after a numbing spell missed his head and he was able to see past it for an opening.

Five points to Slytherin, five to Gryffindor.

Feliciano's first actual opponent of the tournament was a Gryffindor girl from their potions class, one of the few not-Weasleys Feliciano could think of and who sniffed harshly in his direction when they walked next to each other up onto the platform. On the next table and separated by another magic-absorbing barrier was David Baker from Hufflepuff and a Ravenclaw boy.

Creevey had them bow, and Feliciano forgot about his brother and Scotland watching when a disarm curse came zinging towards him. His weight was shared over both feet but he swung his right foot back and out, carrying himself around in a full spin so he could slam his heel back onto the platform for stability and let his wand flick and flash several times between his fingers.

He had to duck from another disarm spell waiting for his to take effect, and then two loud, brilliant bangs of white light went off in rapid succession. Once at her feet, then up in front of her chest. He thrust his wand again and there was the clatter of her wand hitting the floor when his charm ripped it from her hand.

Another five points for Slytherin, and about thirty seconds later five points were awarded to Hufflepuff when Baker's match ended with the Ravenclaw boy taking a tumble off the edge of the table.

Second year matches were mostly about two things: falling off the platform and being stunned by the crowd more than the spells. Feliciano cheered and then held back an opinion when Charles and Albus squared off, began trading jinxes and hexes in a flurry. The match suddenly ended when instead of getting hit with something Charles's foot slipped after he launched his best laughing jinx, and he vanished with a yelp beyond the edge of the platform. It was disheartening, because Albus
was forced all the way to his knees, arms wrapped around his belly and tears in his eyes because he was laughing so hard from the jinx. It was a win by technicality, not skill, and it made Feliciano a little sad when the boy came back to the bench with a sullen look on his face. It was Creevey who kindly removed the jinx from Potter so he could sit and regain his focus.

Feliciano should have been nicer to Baker, but Higgs' loss annoyed him and, when a coin-toss gave him first strike against his classmate, Feliciano felt like being more of a dick.

"Hey, David, remember what you called me in class that time?" They weren't close enough for Feliciano to use his first name, but physically they were when they mounted the platform together right before going to their respective places. The Hufflepuff looked confused.

Until about two minutes later, when Feliciano unleashed the emerald green body of a long cobra from his wand that went shooting at Baker's ankles so quickly that he jumped off the table, never mind falling.

Apparently summoning a badger was just a little too much to expect a twelve-year-old to counter him with.

The second-year portion of the tournament was speeding to an end because they weren't the main attraction. The most Feliciano or Potter could win for their houses was a grand total of twenty points. They were the pre-show, the warm-up, distraction while the real competitors in their seventh-year robes reviewed counter charms from NEWT exams and attempted OWL level wand techniques.

There wasn't much fan-fare at all as Feliciano and Albus Potter climbed up one more time after Feliciano declined to take a break before fighting again.

"Albus."

"Yes, Vargas?"

"I just want to say I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"There's just something really important I have to tell your brother."

Albus looked at him with wide green eyes and a curious tilt of the head, obviously the boy didn't understand, but he also got a very tight look around his eyes that showed he didn't really trust what he was hearing either. When Potter extended his hand, Feliciano was glad to shake it even if it didn't feel every friendly between them.

"You can tell him yourself after our match. Just don't go counting your points before they're won." It was such a shame that Albus Potter had to have such an awful brother, but Feliciano just took his place again at the end of the platform, bowed, and waited.

He leaned out of the way of Albus' first disarm spell, pivoting when a runny nose curse zipped past him in the air. There was a confused pause when he didn't fire back, and then a gust of wind from Potter's wand was countered by a thinner, faster breeze from Feliciano's wand tip. He really wanted to avoid elemental magic though: they were too draining.

Dodging was easy though. Potter couldn't leave his little red box, so even the fastest spells that Creevey had taught them needed a certain amount of time to reach him: always enough that Feliciano could move from corner to corner of his green space, he could twist and turn and usually not even lengthen his stride all that much.
The only time he caught a glimpse of Lovino was to see his brother holding a hand up in Scotland's face telling him to stop fucking trying to say something right now.

"What are you doing!?” The only time Feliciano's wand touched a spell was a particular jinx that just had too wide a berth for him to comfortably lean out of the way, so it slammed the floor after his wand grabbed, redirected and released it over the edge of the platform.

Albus Potter was panting at the other end of the platform, his stamina dangerously low as he started leaning forward like he was about to rest his hands on his knees. But he kept going.

Another jinx, another hex, the same charm three times that Feliciano walked away from. When he could see the exhausted sweat and the frustration burning in Albus Potter's eyes, Feliciano finally answered him.

"You want to fight me, Gryffindor?"

"Yes! That's the whole point!"

And Feliciano waited again, but it was just a beat this time. He looked down at where his wand was resting in his grasp, made up his mind, and looked up again with a shrug.

"Have it your way."

And then his wand started moving. The tip painted a star pattern down next to his leg and then flicked it straight out, drawing another star and another, each one coming together faster than the rest and not launching with the proper stance to guide them, just wild shots that all went screaming in the same direction and the general target. It left the lower right corner of the Gryffindor attack square open and that was where Potter, alarmed by the barrage of body-bind curses, dove to get away from them.

He fell right in the way of a laughing curse like Higgs', and then the red wash of a stunning spell that clamped his lungs shut when his body involuntarily began wheezing all of its air out in a choked laugh.

They were both first year charms. But they weren't meant to be used like that.

Albus only kept his feet for a second or two before hitting his knees and crossing his arms over his chest, wand still in his hand as he opened his mouth wide and choked on the spells. Whatever air he took in was immediately forced out by laughter he couldn't control, but his chest was stunned and the muscles refused to expand or contract so he could breathe.

So he just... didn't breathe.

He fell straight to the floor and one of his legs gave a struggling kick. Feliciano was counting.

Six seconds... seven seconds... eight seconds...

"Vargas?"

Nine and... ten.

"Expelliarmus!"

Albus Potter's wand went flying from his hand and the match was over. In the same breath he released the laughing charm and Professor Creevey's wand was already dealing with the stunning
spell. Albus gave such a deep, resounding gasp and then broke into a coughing fit, flat on his face on the table and shaking where he tried propping himself up on his elbows.

Maybe it was bad form, but instead of watching him Feliciano turned around and spotted the Gryffindor competitors in their seats. Specifically, next to Albus' empty spot he found James Potter's flushed face, teeth bared and air wheezing through his clenched teeth. He looked ready to commit a murder.

Feliciano just spread his hands, inclined his head in a mock bow, and then went back to deal with Albus.

Like he had the day before with his other matches, Feliciano cast the summoning charm on his opponent's wand and caught the magical tool from the air when it came. He carried it across the platform so he could offer a hand to its owner and help Albus, willing or not, to get up to his feet.

"Why- why the hell did you wait?" Potter had spit and tears on his face, most of it just a reaction to the choking as Feliciano pulled a Slytherin handkerchief from his pocket and offered that along with the wand. Albus probably wasn't paying attention because he accepted both tokens so readily, wiping his face off. He was still shaking, but Feliciano couldn't find it in him to regret the technique. There were plenty of more painful spells that Creevey hadn't taught them.

"I forgot the spell."

"Liar."

"Do you want the real reason?" Stitching a smile to his face, Feliciano happily took the handkerchief back when Albus was done with it and slipped it back into his robe pocket, his wand humming contently up its sleeve after winning the match. Albus didn't answer with words, he just watched Feliciano's face carefully and seemed to sense what it was England was always complaining about: Feliciano was too two-faced to take lightly.

"You finish your matches like lightning, why'd you wait with me? What's-" Albus stumbled and stopped his question, but Feliciano heard it anyways: what did James have to do with this?

"Are you two ready to shake or not?" Creevey was there at the edge of the platform before Feliciano could answer, and he didn't know how well he could make his point with a professor standing right there. "It's ten points to Slytherin for that display, Vargas. I'm not quite sure I approve, but I think Potter will agree it was effective." Albus looked uncomfortable with the idea, but Professor Creevey wasn't done. "Albus, give a wave to your mum before she has a fit."

They did shake on it, sportsmanship where Feliciano knew he'd displayed none. But he'd made his point and that plus the point prize made him feel vindicated. As long as he wasn't forced to do it again, everything would carry on just fine.

That satisfied buzz lasted until he and Albus were taking the steps down together, because Feliciano was forced to stop when James Potter appeared on the first step directly in front of him and refused to move.

"James don't." Albus hissed at him, embarrassed by the sound of Professor Creevey kicking up a few comments about the matches behind them to cover up how long it was taking to transition from the second to the third year matches. The three of them were still suck on the steps until James made a surprising move: he offered Feliciano a handshake.

"So you won, Snakeskin." He almost didn't accept it when he heard the insult, but decided to be the
bigger man and get a firm grip on the older Potter's palm and wrist. "Don't go getting a big head about it."

Feliciano regretted the handshake before James pulled his stunt, because he'd felt that tension on his arm before and he knew what was going to happen as soon as the boy in front of him braced his weight. Feliciano's shoes lost their grip and his tiny body wasn't strong enough or in the right position to counter. His wand hand was used to tear him straight off the steps and he slammed the floor in a tumbling roll, almost going face-first but tucking his head and shoulders so he slammed his back and skidded on his tail-bone until he was in front of the bench of Hufflepuff competitors.

"James-!"

Feliciano looked up when the Hufflepuff he'd landed in front of suddenly stood, and he was shocked when he saw David Baker standing there with an affronted, almost angry look on his confused face where he was staring at the Potter brothers. The Hufflepuffs had just had the best view of the throw, and while Baker didn't say anything, Feliciano heard noise building from further down the hall when someone else stood up.

Pascal Zabini was on his feet, badges gleaming and eyes locked on the Potter boys where Albus was hurrying straight to his seat again and James was up on the platform without a look back. Creevey had his back on the student body and the teachers at the head table probably hadn't seen anything with Albus in the way. From the parents' side, it must have looked like he'd tripped.

"Zabini! Zabini! Zabini!" It started out slow and then it built into a chant, one Zabini himself broke off with a sweep of his arm towards the Slytherin seats before beckoning Feliciano to hurry back to his seat next to Higgs.

"That was bloody terrifying what you did to Potter." Charles was in awe and someone on the benches behind him reached out and gave him a firm clap on the shoulders for winning the second-year final.

"Maybe, but I don't think it got my point across." The third-year matches started up with a roar and boom from James Potter's wand, and Feliciano just sat their stewing while the anger he'd riled up in Albus' brother blasted a Hufflepuff classmate of his right off her feet.

"Well you set Hufflepuf straight, take a look at Baker."

Feliciano did, and right as the Hufflepuff benches were grimacing at a back-blast spell that tumbled the third-year girl off the platform, eyes here and there kept swinging around to find him where he was sitting. David Baker himself even squirmed back a little when Potter left the platform to Gryffindor cheers, catching Feliciano's eyes with an uncomfortable look on his face. He nodded in Potter's direction, gave an ugly shake of the head, and then settled back in to watch the rest of the tournament.

Feliciano, content with that, polished his Zabini badge with the edge of his sleeve and settled down to do the same thing.
Parent-Parent Meeting

One hundred points to Slytherin was the only thing that finally, after almost an hour and a half of year-by-year duels, got Arthur's blood pressure under control.

Seventh years knew to hold nothing back. They were still children in Arthur's eyes, but they were standing right on the cusp of adulthood and for them there was more than just house points on the line.

The Ministry's Head Auror was in the crowd, and any Hogwarts Student who had any hopes of entering the law enforcement branch of the Ministry of Magic put their absolute best on display in the hopes of catching his eye. Arthur wasn't so sure nearly disfiguring Harry Potter's niece in the final round would help garner the kind of attention the competitors wanted, but Pascale Zabini almost did exactly that when he dug his heels into the rubbery surface of the platform and controlled a fluid stream of liquid fire from the end of his wand. He held on until the steam from one of the Weasley daughter's attempts to use water forced her to back away and ultimately jump from the platform to safety.

The grand prize of one hundred additional points to Slytherin, the supreme satisfaction of watching Zabini come out on top as Prefect, Head Boy, and Hogwarts Duelling Champion finally made Arthur let go of his anger while the Slytherin students to absolutely exploded with excitement.

"ZABINI! ZABINI! ZABINI!" They stomped their feet, clapped their hands, and chanted his name in time with each other, causing such a roar that it was impossible to tell what passed between Zabini and one of the eldest Weasleys when he crossed the platform and quietly knelt down to see the burns on her face.

Professor Malfoy was there at once to administer treatment of course. His presence freed Zabini up to stand at his full height, let himself smile a little bit and then grin all the way as Professor McGonagall's voice announced him as the full and fair winner. She delivered the points while the Head Boy bowed once to the applause (and roars) of the school, then turned and gave a noble bow to the assembled parents and family members. It was the highest possible note Arthur could think of for Zabini to end his Hogwarts career on.

However, despite the fairy tale ending, that did not all together forgive or negate what had happened an hour earlier on the same platform where Zabini was accepting his praise and preparing to step down.

Headmistress McGonagall manipulated the crowds with her next bit of speech to clear space on the staggered bleachers so they could come apart and transform back into two of the house tables, dishware and cutlery quickly flying from some unknown entrance to the kitchen and setting themselves in high stacks and ordered bunches. Food would be delivered shortly for snacking and staving off hunger after the main event. For now, students and parents were free to wander and mingle as they wished.

Arthur wandered right up behind Italy with more than a few choice things to say that would need somewhere dark and private to come out properly, but was immediately blocked by every other damned Slytherin in their year, not to mention several upperclassmen and every bloody first year too boot. The lot of them only wanted one thing, and that was to congratulate him.

"Excellent show!"
"You really put the fear in Potter!"

"Where'd you learn to do something like that? You used a laughing charm!"

Yes, yes, praise him now. For a twelve-year-old the display had been well worth the attention he was getting. For a grown nation, Arthur was fighting with his own rage again.

Because how dare he.

How dare he suffocate a child in front of England. How dare he use excessive force. To stop Albus' breathing was one thing, but to then leave him like that instead of ending the duel immediately was just-

Arthur was beyond words for it. He couldn't unclench his hands or his teeth, he wanted to just take Italy by the scruff and shake him until the other nation knew exactly what he'd done.

As outraged as Arthur Kirkland was however, there was someone else who managed to not only part the crowd, but enact justice on Italy first.

He did it with the pink flare of a laughing jinx, the red sting of a paralyzing curse, and then the counter-spell that removed the laughter as soon as Italy's lungs were involuntarily emptied and left him with no air and a young body that stood stock still and in obvious pain in a crowd of very frightened children.

"Move."

"That ain't yer wand, Vargas!"

Italy raised his wand and was disarmed with enough force that there was smoke left between his fingers, clutching his hand where the hex burnt him as he fell to one knee still unable to breathe. The second years swept away as the man in all black robes and draped in fury threw something back over his shoulder with the light clatter of wood on stone.

"Take it back then!" South Italy growled. Arthur was barely able to see Scotland scowling and going after the wand Italy's brother had obviously taken from him for the attack.

South Italy's display hadn't drawn everyone's attention, but more and more Slytherins built a circle around the pair as North Italy started shaking from the strain of not breathing and South descended on him like a hawk. The elder brother slipped smoothly into Italian and he spoke very quickly.

"You can't breathe? Of course not, but your heart isn't pounding and the adrenaline isn't driving you insane." It was hard to follow his words but Arthur was focusing hard on it as Lovino Vargas swiftly closed the gap between him and his brother. "Have you lost your God-damned mind? You can sit there calmly because you know I'm not going to kill you! You know how long that spell can last and you know what it's like to pass out because someone is choking the life out of you! He doesn't!"

"Enough!"

Scotland's voice and then a light from his wand that reversed the curse and let Italy suck in a deep, desperate breath of air. Arthur didn't know where to look because his brother took South Italy by the shoulder and hissed at him loud enough for the crowd of students to hear.

"You're in public, you damned Italian!"

"Yes, I'm in public." South Italy answered, not even bothering to lower his voice. "Because in Italy
we discipline our children when they do wrong. We don't cover it up and pretend nothing's the matter!"

There was a bolt of tension that fired between the two of them and Arthur didn't think about going towards Italy, he walked straight across the open space and went to stand next to Scotland. When Scotland didn't fire back at him and cause even more of a scene, South Italy turned and barked again at his brother.

"Come here." He might as well have said it in English because there was no mistaking the command. Italy was still breathing hard and shaking a little, but at the order he started shuffling over. "Don't act like you're hurt, it's your own fault."

"Says you." Italy answered petulantly in English and glanced about. He was looking for his wand.

"You have an apology to make."

"You're not even going to wait for my side of this, are you?" One of the first years was able to run Italy's wand back to the circle, Scorpius taking it from the smaller child and then boldly stepping forward with Higgs to flank Italy and give it back.

"There are no sides!" South shouted, and then gestured sharply, ignoring both boys, for North to step forward and follow him.

The next thing the taller, darker brother said came in a low and grave voice, his words not so fast but grinding harshly over each other like heavy stones. Arthur didn't get a single word of it because South Italy broke from standard Italian completely, fleeting through Latin sounds without resting on a form Arthur could piece together or hope to understand. But North Italy understood it, in fact he even jumped a little and his young face broke open with a kind of stunned wonder that made him actually seem as small as he claimed to be.

South Italy didn't linger after that, he simply turned and swept away with the deep flutter of his black robes. North Italy barely acknowledged his young friends or Arthur himself before quickly hurrying after him, leaving the circle of classmates to collapse as students went to find parents and friends came straight up to Arthur with jaws flapping.

"He's awful!" Scorpius gagged, looking like he was speaking around a Bertie Botts vomit-flavoured bean.

"No wonder Vargas didn't care about him coming," Higgs was right up there next to Scorpius, a white look on his face as he shook his head so fast in the Vargas' retreating direction that it made his cheeks tremble and shake. "I'd have stayed in bed if my dad was like that! And he won!"

"Can you imagine if Potter'd beat him?" The two of them were running out of breath trying to get the hysteria out of their systems, Arthur raised his hands to make them cut it out but Scorpius just kept going. "He hexed him for winning! What- that's insane! That's like my dad giving me detention for catching the snitch!"

"Alright- alright, that's enough, boys." Scotland brought his voice up just enough to say what Arthur had been running for, and there was a very odd sense of comfort that came from just sinking into his brother's shadow so Scotland could handle things plainly instead of stopping to pick and choose his words. "No one ever said the older Mister Vargas was a nice man, but he does know his own strength and you're countin' your friend out if you don't think he can handle a bit of rough handling."

"But Mister Kirkland-!"
"No buts, Mister Malfoy. And you, Mister... Mister I don't recall. What's your name, boy?"

"Charles Higgs, sir. I'm one of their friends."

"I got that part: no buts from you either!"

Charles and Scorpius looked absolutely put out by this, standing there sulking for a few moments while Arthur looked up with something to say and suddenly noticed his brother giving a shocked look way over the crowd of students.

"Scott?" Not the name they'd agreed on but the first thing that rolled off Arthur's tongue. It made Scotland jump a little where his fingers were plucking hard at the narrow end of his short red beard.

"Alright I'll tell you what you boys can do instead." He said quickly, just about to crouch down at eye-level with the three of them. Was that fear in his voice? "You can open your eyes up big and wide, look as damned innocent as you please and pretend none of what just happened ever happened at all, you hear me?"

"What?"

"Why?" Higgs wanted a reason but Scorpius was proactive enough to look around and find it. Arthur followed his gaze and didn't have to see the grin Scorpius came back with.

"Because when my mum finds out what he did to Feli she'll have a fit." And lo and behold: Mrs. Malfoy was storming across the great hall floor towards them. Except that wasn't at all the word for such smooth and even strides, better a viper’s glide that made the green of her robes hold their shape around the white body of her suit and pencil skirt. She was a healer and a healer's wife, a Slytherin mother on top of it, and on an absolute war-path towards them.

"That's why she's not gonna find out and you're gonna take a whole galleon each to keep your mouths shut."

"Two galleons."

"Done!"

Higgs could have called for ten a piece and Scotland would have agreed, because as soon as he said yes he straightened up with a smile and swept forward with Scorpius under his arm like a shield.

"Mrs. Malfoy."

"Mister Kirkland." The body language and smiles were impeccable, plenty of teeth, happy tilt of the head, and an adoring look from mother to son as Scorpius was gaily passed between the two adults and looked baffled by their strange behaviour. "There's such a strange whisper going through the crowd about the elder Mister Vargas? I thought you said he wouldn't be coming to today's event..."

"A bit of a scolding, Mrs. Malfoy, but nothing like what the kids think they saw. Italians ain't exactly known for their tact." He answered the hard question and avoided the easy one, poor show, Scott. He did recover though: "And I can't quite say what changed his mind about the tournament. Yesterday he was adamant that he was too busy but this morning he showed up on my doorstep all ready to go."

The chatter continued and eventually brought the Higgs family and Professor Malfoy over to join them. Charles and Thomas Higgs were happy to introduce their parents to Scotland, which gave Arthur every reason to fear that he'd been packaged up and shipped off to one of his friends' houses.
again this summer as he had last year.

"Quidditch's your passion then, Tom?"

"It is, sir. I've got an invite to the Wigtown Wanderers training camp this summer."

"Excellent! You should be proud of both your boys then, Mister and Mrs. Higgs."

"Have either of you two seen Gamp?" The question struck him and Arthur asked the two boys under the watchful eye of their parents. Charles barely understood the question but Scorpius straightened up and started peering this way and that through the chattering crowds.

"That's weird." The blond child murmured. "She was sitting next to me during the tournament."

"Maybe she's with her dad?" Charles offered instead, but then broke into a troublesome grin. "Or off with Myrtle again, after all it's her fault-"

Scorpius gave the other boy such a sudden smack on the arm that it got Professor Malfoy's attention, and through the mess of scoldings and foul looks that came down on the three of them for it, Arthur never did figure out what Gamp was at fault for.

Childhood really was a very bothersome state of being.

"You're taking this too seriously."

"We're gonna have a talk and you'll see how fucking wrong you are."

But first, Feliciano had to whine and scuff his feet over the floor as he followed Lovino through the weaving crowd until they were right on the edge of red robes and doubtful looks. He groaned a little bit when Lovino didn't stop and they both plowed straight through the clusters of Gryffindor parents and students, going further until they reached the last family sect Feliciano wanted to be caught near.

"Mister Potter." Feliciano saw Albus first, then James, then Rose, and then he was confused by too many faces he did and didn't know. Weasleys of every height and combination were walking around each other and talking, some old enough to be students but not yet, others too old to be students and standing by proud parents and younger siblings.

Harry Potter was a name Feliciano had known during the Wizarding War twenty years ago, but like most things not happening under his influence the specifics faded with time and the catalogues of his memory pushed useless information like that out of reach.

Mr. Potter wasn't a very tall man, but not too short either. He had a stocky, well-built look to him, and a good quality brown tweedy suit under his red-washed robes. The outfit sported gold edges and a pattern of lions across two panels that went straight down from his shoulders, clashing a little bit with his green eyes and at odds with the messy tangles of his short black hair.

"My name is Lovino Vargas, my younger brother is the one responsible for that vulgar display against your son." Harry Potter was a severe man though, and his smile looked like he forced it when he accepted Lovino's handshake and explanation for them coming up so boldly to introduce themselves.

Feliciano had to apologize to Mr. Potter, and then Mrs. Potter when she stepped up next to her
husband curiously with a little girl who was clearly Albus and James' sister. Of course he had to ask the little girl to forgive him for treating her brother harshly, and Feliciano was resigned to his fate when Weasleys started cropping up and there was a grandmother and several uncles standing around him.

Albus himself looked like he wanted to crawl under his father's robe and never be seen or heard from again. His ears were bright red, hands fidgeting nervously, and when James started laughing under his breath the middle Potter child finally lost his cool.

"I'm not made of paper, gran!" But instead of hiding, Albus stomped right out in front of Feliciano and tried to get over his embarrassment. "I was scared, I'll admit, but you apologized after it was done and I believe you."

Albus offered a hand to Feliciano this time and he shook it, silently impressed the way he always was whenever Albus Potter was faced with a choice and consistently made the better one.

"It's fine," Albus insisted as he let go of Feliciano's hand. "There are no hard feelings: I promise."

"Then please excuse us for interrupting." Lovino set a hand on Feliciano's shoulder and it was the permission he'd been waiting for, relieved by the gentle tug that told him to nod to the Potters and turn to follow his brother away.

"Ah- Mister Vargas." But then they had to turn right back around when a woman called them. "A moment, please." Albus's mother had a hand on her husband's elbow and went from looking at Lovino, to her husband, and then speared one of her children with a very firm glare.

James Potter writhed in his own skin.

"Mom, no-"

"Oh, that's a good idea, Ginny!" An older witch, white hair spun with red strands and curled around her smiling face lit up as something jumped between them. Her robe was bright red and spotted with gold sunflowers, a matching sunflower bag clutched in her hands as she sent a scolding look at James Potter, finger raised and wagging in time. "Yes, James! You come forward right now."

"But Gran-!"

"No, I think that's a fair idea." His mother, grandmother, and father all agreed to it and Feliciano was struggling to keep down the grin as James Potter was made to march out and fight with himself in a huff. The side Feliciano didn't like won out in the end.

"You pulled a dirty trick on my brother so I did one back on you. I'm not sorry for it at all."

"James!" Mrs. Potter hissed his name and James had the strength to stand there, back-straight, and glare at Feliciano while Lovino kept his hand firmly on his shoulder.

"Mister Vargas." Mr. Potter stepped around the sudden scolding and dark looks from his family around his son, addressing Lovino directly where his brother didn't say anything. "He doesn't understand, but I do, so please accept my apologies." Feliciano was not used to needing his brother to do business on his behalf, it was aggravating to watch Potter extend a hand over Feliciano's head that obviously wasn't meant for him.

"Your apologies for watching your son throw my brother to the ground, or your apologies for that same boy showing how desperately he lacks common manners?" Lovino bit back fast and hard, Feliciano's eyes watching as James was given grief by his mother, brother and grand-mother before
Lovino's fingertips dug into his shoulder. "Veneziano-

His name was snapped and Feliciano turned immediately to vanish behind the black cloud of his brother's robe, very, very happy with the way things had just turned out.

The promised food was appearing from the kitchens now but Lovino didn't stop walking, the two of them marching past other clusters of families, groups of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws and strangers all mingling and speaking happily. For one brief moment, Feliciano thought he saw David Baker and the Finnigan twins hurrying to say something to him, but then they saw Lovino and all three Hufflepuffs braked hard and stepped out of the way to meld back into the crowds.

"I'm going to ask you a serious question, and I expect an honest answer." Lovino didn't bother speaking English and Feliciano appreciated it, the two of them exiting the noise and crowds of the Great Hall. Lovino's sense of direction failed him immediately, but Feliciano knew the castle well and chose which way to go. Sunlight and windows meant taking a left turn and going up a flight of stairs. They didn't wander too far from the hall, but the place where they stopped was private enough with a clear view across the grounds down to the forest and the lake. "When was the last time you took that charm off like I asked you to?"

"Ah-" Ah was not the answer Lovino wanted, and when his brother turned to look down at him instead of out the windows, Feliciano knew this was going to be a lot harder than his apologies to the Potters. "Lovino I can't. There's no privacy in this castle! The showers, the baths, the beds, it's all communal!"

"Take it off now."

"And get caught? No!"

"This is not a game!" It shocked him when Lovino put both hands on his face, warm fingers brushing his hair back and thumbs stroking under his eyes. His brother knelt down in front of him and Feliciano mimicked him, bringing them to almost the same height again so they could see eye to eye. The green of Lovino's gaze was shaking though, pupils snapping back and forth while staring at him, flecks of yellow and brown appearing and mixing the colours together under a fan of dark lashes. "I was the one who got lost last time and I'm not losing you!"

Feliciano jumped and then threw himself forward, locking his arms around Lovino's neck and putting his head down against the familiar smell of churned earth and dusty office paper. Under the scent of aftershave and cologne there was a spiciness to his skin like fresh tomato vines, familiar strength in the way he hugged back with both large hands swallowing Feliciano's shoulders. Being this small and getting an embrace this full, it was almost like when their grandfather had been alive instead...

"But I'm fine- Lovino, I'm just fine..."

"You hurt a child today, Veneziano." Lovino dropped his voice until he was whispering, breaths passing over Feliciano's ear as he closed his eyes and let the hug continue to linger and last. "You didn't just fight him, you hurt him. You made him an example."

"But I know I did." Lovino let go and made him shuffle back so they could see each other again, hands on Feliciano's shoulders as he explained. "And I didn't lose my temper, I was counting down too and I knew exactly how long-"

"You suffocated a child, Veneziano... Let that sink in." But... he didn't want to linger on it. "You were cruel and his brother defended him, that's a non-issue: I would have done the same and you're..."
not half as fragile as a human child."

"Lovino..."

It led to another hug, not as desperate this time but just as wanted, one that grew tighter and warmer in a steady spiral of breaths.

"Don't become that person again," Lovino whispered. "This isn't a game and I won't give you up without a fight."

"I'm fine. I promise there's nothing wrong with me..." He promised and he hugged a little tighter, remembering something else worth saying as Lovino slowly started to relax his grip again. "What made you decide to come today? To warn me about this?"

"Fuck no." They did let go of each other again, stopping so they could bump noses and then foreheads for a moment, affection coming easily after spending too long apart. It was really, really nice to see Lovino smile after being so serious. "I came here hoping to watch Kirkland kick your ass and that be the end of it until you pulled that shit on Potter."

"Gee, thanks." So why had he come? Lovino didn't ignore the question; he just reached inside the breast pocket of his black robe and pulled out the straight white edge of an envelope.

"This arrived yesterday afternoon when I was in the middle of a fucking meeting." It was Hogwarts stationary and addressed to "Mr. Vargas, somewhere in London." before Lovino's wrist snapped it away so Feliciano couldn't read it.

"Who's it from?"

"None of your business who it's from."

"Come on! Let me see it!"

"It's not for you!"

Lovino waved the letter in his face and then extended his arm up when Feliciano made a grab, laughing at him when he swung his hand out behind him when another swipe missed the letter. Feliciano was on his feet and ready to just climb over his brother when with a light snap and a flick of his wrist the paper vanished.

"Hah!"

"That was magic!"

"No, it wasn't."

They bickered all over again until Lovino went into another pocket of his robes and pulled out a familiar blue and gold-spangled drawstring bag.

"That's Scotland's, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is now shut up." Lovino spread the bag's mouth open and reached inside, his arm vanishing almost all the way to his elbow before he found what he was looking for and withdrew first one, then a second small crystal wine glass and set them on the floor between them. Feliciano had to hold his breath to keep from gasping or saying anything, bouncing on his haunches and quickly looking back
and forth to make sure no one was about to interrupt them.

"Is it one of yours or one of mine?"

"I'm not telling you." There was the illicit pop of a wine bottle somewhere deep inside the bag and, without properly taking it out of the satchel where they could get into trouble, Feliciano was invited to lean forward and give it a sniff.

Ah-

The perfect medley of fruity notes, a dark red that smelled like it had been aging slowly to get the richness of the barrels to flavour it. He hadn't had wine since Christmas and eagerly watched Lovino try to get a handle on both the bottle and the bag so he could tip and pour a splash of wine into each glass. His hidden hands replaced the cork and with a quick gesture to say shut up and be quiet, they toasted and drank.

Feliciano was instantly betrayed, bereaved, and abhorred.

"This-!"

And his bastard brother was sitting there looking like he was about to burst trying not to smile and not dare to laugh.

"Grape juice!?!"

"How much trouble do you expect me to cause this school in one day?"

"How dare you put juice in an Amarone bottle!"

Lovino was stifling so much laughter at his pain that there were tears building in his brother's eyes, but all Feliciano cared about was tossing himself hard against the wall under the windows to sulk and not look at him.

"Your face... your fucking face..."

"I'm never speaking to you again."

"Then just take this instead, asshole." Feliciano was offered a blue envelope from somewhere he didn't want to know about, and stared at it suspiciously like if he touched it the thing would turn into carrot sticks and baby crackers. "Don't open it until after your stupid exams are over with, understood?"

"Still not speaking to you."

"Oh, cut it out."

His hair was ruffled and then a hard kiss was pushed down on the top of his head, both gestures affectionate enough that despite his convictions Feliciano ended up reaching out for one more hug. He really did hate saying goodbye, but that was what this was. He could feel Lovino getting ready to go just in the way he hung on through the hug and squeezed hard with another warning.

"Scotland was saying next year you'll be allowed to go into town at the base of the mountain. Promise me you'll take the charm off then."

"If I can find a safe place for long enough, then yes, I promise."
"I mean it, Veneziano."

"I mean it too."

"...Then I'll see you again at the end of June." And with that...

He was gone.
Exams through May and June crept by so slowly that Arthur almost invested in a new wrist-watch to verify how slowly it really went. A dash of adult conversation and a hint of the world beyond the school had broken the illusion to pieces. He and Italy were both sullen and utterly inconsolable until the end of term.

Which meant they fit in just fine with all of their classmates.

Italy rode the minor high of his tournament win for the rest of May, but as soon as students stopped asking to see the small brass puck he'd been awarded for winning his bracket, he stopped pulling it out. It was a party favour and would probably wind up in a box in a closet back in Rome.

It wasn't until June that Arthur noticed an odd change in Slytherin seating arrangements in lessons, because as he settled down in Transfiguration for Professor Parkinson's end of year exam.

"Mind you keep your damned flowers on that side of the desk, Vargas," he drawled, not even looking at his partner until he heard a very wrong voice.

"Mind you keep your stuffy little nose on your side as well, Kirkland." Arthur's head snapped up to show him Margaret Finnick giving him a bitter look with her red-gold hair pulled back in a loose pony tail instead of hanging full and curled around her heart-shaped face. Her blue eyes were bright and resentful, an eerie combination as Arthur looked around quickly searching for the idiot who was usually his partner. "Don't bother." She sniped.

Italy spent the transfiguration exam sitting next to Gloria Flint, which was a bizarre occurrence since if he wasn't sitting next to one of the boys, specifically Arthur, then he was always sitting next to Eliza. It was the first time all year that Charles had to suffer next to a Ravenclaw student, and he made a point of growling threateningly under his breath for the entire Exam to show how much he resented Scorpius for being a gentleman and snagging Eliza's hand so she wouldn't be the odd one out. They were all well aware of how nervous she got in Transfiguration, and Scorpius' act probably saved her grade for the year.

It was also very strange to see Flint and Finnick not going about arm-in-arm together for the whole lesson. The two girls did regroup and stalk off together after the lesson, noses in the air and steps in perfect time as best friends always were, but the gap was strange none the less.

And then it happened again in Charms later that same week, leaving Mr. Baker from Hufflepuff at a loss because his usual partner had Miss Flint making a point of how much brighter her polishing charm worked than Italy's.

By the end of June with only Defense Against the Dark Arts left between them and summer vacation, Arthur was over his annoyance and was now plainly amused by the rest of his classmates. Specifically, he enjoyed watching the knives come out of all three children one afternoon in the library when, instead of simply joining their table as they might have last year, Miss Finnick and Miss Flint simply came and stole Feliciano away while they were in the midst of scrounging up possible answers to the written portion of Creevey's exam.

"Could you give us a hand, Vargas? The book we want is just a little too high."

"Use a spell." Scorpius hissed under his breath, raking his quill down the same bit of parchment until the nib cut right through it.
But Italy loved being of use, and he enjoyed deluding himself into believing that he was helping bridge the gap between the other two Slytherins and the rest of their year. After he scampered off to answer some nonsense call to help find a foot-stool or use a simple summoning charm, Arthur took a look around the table in time to watch Eliza completely lose her temper and set Italy's abandoned quill on fire.

"D'you think he fancies her?" Charles asked, either pretending his IQ had suddenly dropped or otherwise completely losing track of his mouth. Arthur tried very hard not to laugh down over his essay as Scorpius rolled his eyes and Eliza gave a furious little squeak.

"She fancies him you lout." Scorpius told it plainly and Arthur just dipped his quill and kept writing. "She hasn't left him alone since the tournament."

"She's just waiting until he lets his guard down, and then before you know it he'll be chopped up into potions ingredients." Eliza had the most vicious way of speaking when she was angry, leaving her wand and scribbling madly on her homework, even taking one of the textbooks she'd been sharing with Italy and slamming it shut without marking the page.

"Well the year's almost over, so you won't have to put up with it for much longer."

"Us?" Scorpius got on Arthur's case now where he'd neglected to write a single thing on his notes for the test. "He's your best friend, isn't he? How many times have you been paired up with Hufflepuffs alone this week?"

"You forget that Baker and I scored perfectly in Charms."

The children were inconsolable, and when Italy couldn't figure it out on his own and asked right before their Defense class what the problem was supposed to be, Arthur just laughed it off and didn't bother telling him. They could have a merry chat about it over some nice wine or coffee after getting back into London tomorrow. After this test, there was the feast to consider.

He didn't regret this decision five minutes later when he looked around and Italy was confused by how quickly Miss Flint had taken hold of his hand with the obvious understanding that he would be her partner for the final exam, not Arthur's.

He did feel a sense of apprehension when Scorpius and Higgs jumped to each other and Eliza was glaring into being Finnick's partner.

But Arthur Kirkland almost had kittens on the classroom floor when he turned around and saw who his Gryffindor partner was.

"Kirkland."

"Miss Weasley."

The two of them, to Professor Creevey's delight, wound up scoring perfect marks in the class. But that grade was a conscious effort on Arthur's part because it took every ounce of will not to misfire one of his curses right at a certain Italian's stupid back.

"I'm not speaking to you again."

"Oh, come on! Not you too!" Yes him too, stupid Italian.

That evening, Slytherin's hopes that maybe, maybe they'd squeaked out a win with Zabini's tournament triumph were dashed, because last minute calculations and points awarded for perfect test
results brought a horrifying truth. It didn't matter that Ravenclaw had cinched the Quidditch Cup again this year, they still came in third behind Gryffindor and Slytherin.

And by five measly points, Slytherin came in second. And they were five irrelevant points they wouldn't have won if Arthur hadn't boosted Rose Weasley's grade at the very last second because he petulantly hadn't wanted to see Flint and Vargas get the praise.

He spent the banquet under the table.

Quite literally under the table.

Scorpius grabbed him a pudding and handed it down to him where he was sitting on the floor, because that was how far under the table Arthur stayed for the entire evening.

Italy joined him for a little bit, but when Zabini caught them he was forced to climb back out to the noise and red confetti of the Gryffindor win. Arthur was stubborn and stayed down until he looked back up through his spot on the bench and saw Zabini standing there with arms folded and badges glittering.

"Get up, Kirkland."

"I'd really rather not, sir."

And that was how the United Kingdom of Great Britain and North Ireland wound up taken by the scruff and dragged out of the great hall by an eighteen year old boy.

"I won't have that kind of behaviour from someone like you, Kirkland, it's downright undignified." The Head Boy took him outside and around the corner from the great hall's entrance, a safe bit of stonework keeping him out of sight while Zabini, with no fear at all of being questioned, stood there tall and proud with hands on his waist.

"But Gryffindor only won because-"

"Gryffindor won, Kirkland because they performed better than us this year." Arthur hadn't expected to hear something so mature come from such a young man. "In the tournament last month only Vargas and I won our years for Slytherin, we didn't even have a fourth year competitor." Well, they had competed but... not very well, no. "And as much as Tom tried we barely kept our head above the water in Quidditch. Those are the two biggest places to get the lead in house points and we gave them both up, so don't you dare act like you should be ashamed for making the effort to get points in the best way you know how."

"By sharing them with Rose Weasley?" Arthur answered, not sure where these petulant feelings were coming from, but somehow willing to let Zabini verbally beat them out of him.

"By earning them in the first place, Kirkland!" And the Head Boy wasn't about to spare him just because it was his last night in Hogwarts. "You scored perfect marks in almost every class this year, don't act like just because Hufflepuff has more students, or Ravenclaws pool their study time, or Gryffindors are just damned lucky that that means you're being overlooked! Binns likes you, Binns doesn't like anybody- so don't let five silly little points get in your way. You're a Slytherin, so you'd better start acting like one: growth and renewal, Kirkland. Whatever hurts you now, I expect you to tear it off this summer and come back next year ready to show those other houses what these green robes are really about."

Arthur wasn't shocked by what he was hearing, he was stunned by who was saying it. Zabini's voice was emotional: it was pitched to make him believe, to make sure he didn't dare stop listening or feel
like there was any way to deny what the young man was saying or how much he believed in it. He had charisma, and patience Arthur had recognized from day one. His tolerance for stupidity and cruelty were both outstanding, and his ceaseless drive to do better was worth the highest possible respect...

He was the best possible result after seven years of abuse, dismissal, and harassment for green robes. An internalized reaction to all the naysaying and teasing that lauded Slytherins and slimy and unwanted: he'd made himself better because he'd grown up hearing that he would always be worse.

"...Thank you." And Arthur realized how much he'd needed to hear something like this, to witness the strength Zabini wasn't hoarding all for himself, but was desperately trying to pass on.

So tonight was the first time Arthur noticed something that should have struck him right away. On his breast were his Slytherin badge and silver P for Prefect. Where had his Head Boy badge gone...? *Oh Lord...*

The answer came when the two of them shook hands and Arthur's palm didn't touch skin, it struck green velvet and silver embroidery. He jumped and tried to pull away, but Zabini held firm.

"I can't-" he stuttered. "I absolutely can't, Zabini, no-"

"It won't make you Head Boy, Kirkland. After we reach London tomorrow the last of the magic will run out of it." No, no, no: this wasn't his, it wasn't meant for him. "You can give it back when you make Head Boy, understood?"

Arthur didn't answer, there was a bloody frog in his throat as Zabini's hand slipped away and the Head Boy nodded firmly before striding off to go back to the feast and his friends. He'd get in trouble if he was caught out here all alone without Zabini's protection, but there was nothing for anyone to give or take away from him point-wise with the Gryffindors still chanting and the House cup sitting unseen on their table around the corner.

For the first time in two years Arthur couldn't blame the charm around his wrist for what he was feeling. Had he been in his normal body his knees still would have been weak. He still would have used both hands to cradle the Head Boy badge glittering in his grasp, and there probably still would have been the inevitable sting of tears touching his eyes as his mouth trembled. He was irrevocably torn between getting a damned grip on himself or just letting the moment have him.

Head and Prefect badges were very similar in terms of style, both were ridged with the house's accent colour, in Slytherin's case: silver. It was shaped after the Hogwarts shield with two snakes slithering down from the highest part of the shield, heads and tongues reaching around the engraved *P. Zabini* at the bottom. There was a silver H and B for the rank's name, and a bed of emerald green velvet that made the lettering stand out. Written in minute detail along the snake bodies was the founder's name, Salazar Slytherin, twisting around the silver.

The back side was solid silver, engraved with Hogwarts' proper crest, Zabini's full name, the date of issue, and the nearly-gone glyph of the truth curse placed on all Prefect and Head badges at Hogwarts. The phrase *Clever Cunning Ambition* was also engraved.

It took Arthur a long time to fall asleep after the other boys ate themselves into a coma and Italy pulled his curtains shut to try and make sense of the itinerary papers South Italy had sent him concerning his return to Rome. It wasn't a restless kind of wakefulness, just persistent.

Persistent like the constant glitter of the half-light off a memento that meant more than five measly
Sadly, when he woke up the next morning to packed trunks and the chatter of going home, there was also the alarmed squeaking of Professor Malfoy's ferret Bella refusing to move and let students out of the Slytherin Dormitory. She even bit Miss Finnick's finger.

"Talk to the damned thing, Malfoy, you must know how to calm it down."

"First of all: she's not an it. And second: she isn't even mine."

The lot of them were holed up in the common room for nearly an hour, a curious whisper running through the girls and coming up from the ladies dorms before they finally saw Eliza looking shaken and completely miserable. She came up to the boys behind Finnick and Flint, who looked deeply pleased with themselves but said nothing. If Eliza tried telling anyone, the other two girls completely shut her down.

Finally, at quarter past eleven the ferret keeping them inside finally turned her back on the students, squeaked three times at the door and the common room entrance abruptly rattled and ground its way open. Professor Malfoy swept into the chamber looking exhausted, something none of the second or first years had ever seen, and when he spoke his voice lacked its usual clarity as he made his announcements briefly.

"An early lunch is being served to students in the Great Hall, you should hurry along while your luggage is delivered to the Hogwarts Express, the carriages will leave at noon sharp and you are all expected to be in attendance. That is all."

"Professor Malfoy!" Scorpius' father was ready to duck right out of the common room as soon as he finished speaking, but was forced to stop and turn around again when all eyes swung over to a distraught looking seventh-year girl. Arthur spied Zabini and the other seventh year boys hovering quiet close to the rest of their classmates, but this girl stood alone. "Please, where is Margaret?"

Margaret Finnick wrinkled her nose, clearly annoyed to share a name with whoever was being discussed. Professor Malfoy, meanwhile, let the conflict show on his face before his expression hardened, grey eyes narrowing as he let off something like anger.

"If it concerns you so much Miss Baldrick then perhaps you should have kept a closer eye on her." Miss Baldrick looked like she was going to cry, but no one seemed to know enough to say anything before Professor Malfoy remembered something and looked sharply at the second years. Why was he so-? "Mister Vargas, follow me."

"Me?" Looking at Italy gave Arthur a clear view of Scorpius, who looked so pale it was a wonder he was still standing, but his stomach bottomed out completely when Italy was called. "But Professor I haven't-"

"The Headmistress asked for you by name, Vargas, and I'm in no mood to have you argue with me." His end of the year debrief with McGonagall? Malfoy certainly wasn't being very subtle about it this time. Italy moved with the weight of the entire house watching him, and professor Malfoy didn't even give parting words to the rest of them before exiting the dormitory as suddenly as he'd come.

Bella the ferret scampered after them, and that was the end of Arthur's second year experience at Hogwarts.
Feliciano wasn't sure if he was supposed to talk.

He'd never seen Professor Malfoy so upset before. His white hair wasn't brushed properly and his robes, once Feliciano fell in step behind him, were wrinkled and the same ones he'd worn at the feast last night. It meant he probably hadn't slept...

There was no one in the dungeons as they walked, but even the hallways higher up were empty. Somewhere far away he thought he finally heard voices near the great hall, and Professor Malfoy walked him straight past Professor Longbottom at the head of a long train of angry Gryffindors. Some of the younger students were crying, or looked like they had been. The older ones were muttering as the Slytherins passed and Feliciano caught a murderous look from James Potter through the passing faces.

It looked like the other houses had all been locked up in their dormitories too...

They climbed higher through the castle and Feliciano tried to remember the way to Headmistress McGonagall's office. It was a confusing path that felt like it doubled back on itself several times, but eventually they reached a familiar gargoyle statue and Professor Malfoy stopped in front of it.

He hesitated, and then gave the password.

"The Portrait of the Fat Lady."

The stone gargoyle grunted and shook its head, then limbered up and stood so it could shuffle out of the way of the staircase leading up to the Headmistress' office. Before they even reached the unlocked door at the top of the stairs, Feliciano could hear weeping.

"Please! Please, Professor you can't!"

"I certainly can, Miss Adams!"

"I didn't do anything wrong I swear it!"

Professor Malfoy didn't hesitate, he grasped the doorknob and marched straight inside.

"You were the only student out of bed in the entire school. I have reports from all four heads of house and three house ghosts which say as much." Headmistress McGonagall was an empress in her chair, commanding the circular space of her busy office where portraits of Headmasters past were looming down dangerously to watch the clash between an ancient witch and a very young and very frightened one.

He'd heard her name before though...

"But that means you didn't ask the Baron, did you?" Feliciano didn't have much contact with the upper Slytherin students, so he only knew Miss Adams by face and probably had only heard her name a few times. She was sobbing uncontrollably with a green handkerchief held up to her face.

"And I told you! I told you where I was! Don't make me say it again but I told you!"

"And Mister Scamander denies your story."

"He- He what?"

"Thank you, Professor Malfoy." Headmistress McGonagall looked up from where Miss Adams slowly stumbled back and then fell into a wide chair in front of the Headmistress' desk, face buried in
her hands and shoulders shaking with silent sobbing. "You may leave Mister Vargas here and escort Miss Adams down to Hogsmeade. She will be kept apart from the other students until she reaches London, and her parents will be waiting to pick her up from Platform Nine and Three Quarters. The final decision will be made by the end of today."

"Yes, Headmistress." Professor Malfoy's voice was so brittle it sounded ready to crack when he used it, silence stretching where only Miss Adams' tears could be heard. When she finally found the strength to stand again, face red and eyes unbearably raw from crying, she stepped around the chair only to stop and turn back to the headmistress, croaking out a simple question.

"M-My wand...?"

"I doubt you'll be needing it again, Miss Adams."

Feliciano's heart unwillingly broke when a life-ending sentence was passed and Miss Adams' face opened up with raw grief. She turned away from the Headmistress with eyes tightly shut and almost ran Feliciano over trying to reach Professor Malfoy, who instead of remaining cold and rigid let her run straight to him and find comfort in a brief, sobbing embrace where he stroked her hair quietly and it sounded like she screamed against his chest. By the time he managed to help her start taking the stairs down to reach the hallway again, the green looked like it was already leaching out of her robes...

He had to speak, and the duo hadn't gone more than two steps down before he found words.

"Maraget Adams." He repeated, turning to look at Headmistress McGonagall again where she gave him a surprised look for speaking so strangely. "The girl who was missing the night her dorm room's painting was killed?"

It was like firing shots in the air. That's how fast Professor Malfoy stopped walking away and Headmistress McGonagall sat straight up as the words registered.

"Pardon me?" The Headmistress asked.

"Well, the night there was all that screaming, Professor Malfoy took down the gender charm and I kind of followed him." Stepping away from the stairwell so he could look down it at Professor Malfoy's stunned face and see the Headmistress's desk made things a little easier. "Sorry, Professor, but how could I resist? But I think you said that there were only four girls in the dorm instead of five. Wasn't Miss Adams the one who'd left?"

"The dungeons locked themselves shut as soon as the screams were heard." Professor Malfoy relayed, and the way he looked straight at Headmistress McGonagall answered a question Feliciano hadn't asked. All of this was happening over the paintings, and the student the teachers thought they'd caught in the act.

"A tinge of grey does not excuse black actions."

Feliciano felt himself get ready to say something at the same moment Professor Malfoy took a breath, but then they both stopped and looked right at each other instead. The professor couldn't speak in front of the student, and the Nation couldn't reveal himself in front of the professor.

But as much as Feliciano wanted justice for massacred art and an end to the terror in the school, he wound up speaking first.

"Check her fingernails."
"What?" Both witches and the wizard questioned him, Miss Adams still crying but pulling her hands up and staring at her fingers like she didn't understand. Professor Malfoy took one of her hands to take a look too, but they didn't know what they were looking for.

"Headmistress McGonagall, which painting was attacked last night?"

The headmistress didn't look like she wanted to answer him, but forced the words out.

"The Portrait of the Fat Lady, the traditional guardian of Gryffindor Tower."

"Was she scratched to death like all the others?"

"How can you know anything about that?" Professor Malfoy demanded harshly, and Feliciano looked at him with the biggest grin he could muster.

"Oh, I found the door back in February-"

"You what!?"

"See! See this is why I didn't want to tell anyone!" And then he promptly started backing up, because he'd really never ever seen Scorpius’ dad look that angry before. "I didn't do anything! I just flipped them over to look at the backs!"

"Draco." Professor Malfoy wasn't losing control, but Headmistress McGonagall said his first name harshly and got his seething attention. When Feliciano looked at her the Headmistress had her head resting on the back of her chair, and with one hand she gestured over to a tall, covered rectangular frame that Feliciano had missed seeing thanks to all the attention on Miss Adams.

Professor Malfoy crossed the office immediately and started pulling off the grey tarp that had been flung over the mangled portrait. Underneath it was all grey and black paint, its face shredded and canvas ripped free. Professor Malfoy could have used magic to lift and turn the frame around, but he seemed in the mood to use his arms and his own strength, tilting it onto one corner and walking it until the back side was facing the rest of them. Headmistress McGonagall stood up and Miss Adams joined them as Feliciano walked up and pointed to a place high in the corner where the canvas had held up better.

"Nail marks."

"Miss Adams, make your hand into a claw shape, would you?"

Adams was confused again, clearly running on less sleep than Professor Malfoy. With permission from the headmistress, Feliciano took a blank sheet of parchment off McGonagall's desk and blew out one of the red wax candles resting there for light. He rubbed the melted wax hard over the paper, and then happily waved Adams over to him.

"Like this, pretend you're really angry and just-!" Just scratch and claw at the paper. Adams was still crying, tears leaking down her face where she looked like she was at her limit, but she did was she was told, taking a few harsh, desperate moments before her face started twisting with anger.

"Scamander..." she hissed. "You- You lying troll!"

She raked her nails over the paper horizontally like a cat, then took a glance at the Fat Lady's ruined canvas and mimicked the vertical drag of the fingernails that had done the damage. She cut and scratched until she wore away the wax, sobbing furiously when Feliciano took it away and Headmistress McGonagall moved to hold it up against the abused back of the painting.
They didn't match.

Adams' hand was too big, her nails too short, and the way she crooked her pinky finger made the cutting marks narrow down and come together at the end of each slash, not carry on straight down until the canvas gave out.

Headmistress McGonagall dropped the paper and her whole arm like they weighed fifty pounds, closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath in through the nose.

"Miss Adams," the Headmistress' voice almost broke just saying the name. "You may collect your wand and proceed downstairs to breakfast in the great hall with the rest of your graduating class, while I-" She abruptly tore the wax-stained page in two, then four, then a dozen more pieces and let them fall to the floor, head bowed before she picked herself back up again and marched straight to her desk. "While I begin drafting my most sincere apologies for your family and the trouble this mess has caused."

"You mean I'm not-?"

"Facing last-minute expulsion and arrest? No, Miss Adams, and you have Mister Vargas to thank for that."

Feliciano was caught up in such a sudden, overwhelming hug that he completely missed what Professor Malfoy and the Headmistress had to say to each other. Adams caught him in such a fierce embrace that he almost couldn't breathe around her squeezing, the eighteen-year-old witch on her knees and sobbing her thanks to him and calling him such a wonderful, amazingly clever little boy and she'd never forget this and she'd make sure everyone in the school knew what he'd done for her.

"And that Scamander!" She let go of him so hard Feliciano almost fell over. "A year of sneaking around because oh no! He couldn't be caught dating a Slytherin! Said everything would come out when we graduated- well! Lets see him talk about it when I'm done with him!"

"So long as you don't end up back here, Miss Adams." Headmistress McGonagall gave her a light scolding that Adams barely heard, she was too busy thanking Professor Malfoy and remembering to bow deeply to the headmistress like she really was a queen.

"Yes- of course, I promise. May I just-?"

"Of course." Adams was gone in a flash, a happy, relieved sob fluttering back up the stairs as she vanished and the gargoyle shuffled out of her way so she could escape.

"Professor Malfoy you are also excused to go freshen up and get some rest. I assure you, Mister Vargas isn't in any sort of trouble."

Headmistress McGonagall was focused on Malfoy, but Scorpius' father was staring at him instead. It looked like he was working very hard to figure out what he wanted to say, so Feliciano was patient enough to wait for him.

"I would take away twenty points for all of this rule-breaking, Vargas." Oh, that wasn't what he'd been hoping- "And then I'd give a hundred back for what you just did. Unfortunately, the House Cup has already been won this year. This means there's a debt to pay."

"Draco..." Headmistress McGonagall's voice was kindly, but almost weak. "What will young Scorpius think if you aren't there to see your house off? A terrible night is over."

Professor Malfoy really did look like he was about to fall asleep on his feet. His grey eyes seemed
dull and he was swaying slightly where he was standing. His familiar was draped over one of his shoulders, pawing absentmindedly at his chest and neck trying to keep her balance as he let his eyes close for a moment and turned the sleepy look into a nod.

"There isn't much time before the carriages leave, Mister Vargas, be brief if you can." And with another exhausted nod, Professor Malfoy turned and took the stairs down and out of the Headmistress' office, leaving Feliciano and Minerva McGonagall alone at last.

"You must think me such a fool." When he turned back to look at her, the Headmistress was worrying her fingers together in front of her, a fresh sheet of parchment unfurled on her desk and a quill already resting in ink. She placed her wrinkled hands flat on the top of the desk to try and stop whatever shakes were running through her, and flicked a non-existent speck of dust off her paper. "Completely addled and unfit to teach anymore."

"Headmistress-

"I called you here this morning to announce that the vandalism was dealt with and to tell you-although I gather you already know, that the body of Italian works destroyed this year at Hogwarts is an affront that will not be tolerated." Grasping her quill in one rigid hand, the Headmistress began letting black ink flow in neat, fluid strokes across the parchment, the light scratching sound showing how delicately she handled the nib despite her tense appearance. "I have never been so- so simultaneously relived and yet mortified at the same time. To think I almost snapped that poor girl's wand."

"Headmistress McGonagall..." Pausing to see if she'd interrupt him again, she didn't and he was free to speak. "Are there really no leads concerning these attacks?"

"Absolutely none."

"Do you really think so?" A new voice startled Feliciano so badly he jumped. "Oh!" It also made Headmistress McGonagall's head snap up. "I apologize, I should not have interrupted."

"Albus." What? No, it definitely wasn't Potter's voice: it was an old man with warm words and soft intonation. "Albus Dumbledore, you come back to your frame at once."

Headmistress McGonagall didn't even look up from her scratching and scribbling to give the command, and Feliciano watched as several other sleepy Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts were nudged a little in their frames as the speaker came back into view. He took up position directly across the office from Headmistress McGonagall's desk, taking a seat on an ornate chair that looked even more throne-like than the one behind McGonagall's desk.

Albus Dumbledore was like Harry Potter: a name Feliciano had once known and now could barely remember. The wizard in the portrait was old though; old beyond years with snowy white hair and a long beard merging into a long frizzy mane down his shoulders and front, blue and star-spangled robes with half-moon glasses perched on his long nose made him appear grandfatherly and kind. The image of a long silver sword covered in brilliant red rubies made him seem a little less grandfatherly and much more formidable.

"What were you saying, Albus?" Headmistress McGonagall put her quill down and folded her hands together briskly, looking up as Feliciano was nodded towards the seat Adams had been crying in earlier. He twisted around so he could see both of them clearly and listened.

"Well, Minerva, speaking as a painting myself I can say that this morning's tragedy does shed some
light on the issue. Perhaps our intrepid inquirer can help you uncover the truth." The nod in his direction made Feliciano turn back around in his seat with a question.

"Was he always this wordy?"

"Always." The headmistress allowed, then raised her voice. "Albus, it has been a long and exhausting night. Speak plainly if you would."

"Read the name, boy." Boy? Feliciano was used to it from Professors, not paintings of which he was older than the techniques, nevermind the subjects.

But he did get up and he did walk back over to the Fat Lady's mangled portrait, kneeling down looking for the artist's name and...

"Black?" That... that was the least Italian name he could think of. "Every single one has been by an Italian artist, was the Fat Lady herself Italian?"

"Not to my knowledge, no." McGonagall answered, eyes narrow and mouth pulled into a sour line.

"The Venetian Gondolier, the Tiberian Nymphs..." Professor Dumbledore's painting started speaking again, rambling off names and characters from the deceased paintings. "The Tuscan Flower Girl, the Lovers of Milan, Bruticus the Barbarian..." Wait...

"Hang on."

"Mister Vargas?"

He put his hands on the mangled frame and tried to shift it, feeling the whole thing come off balance and jumping back with a yelp as the Fat Lady's portrait toppled over and crashed to the stone floor with an impossible bang! He woke up the rest of the paintings that had started napping after Adams and Malfoy left, and flinched when McGonagall raised her voice at him.

"Vargas!"

"I'm sorry! These hands aren't very strong..."

But now the painted side of the portrait was looking up, and Feliciano put his foot through the great hole that had been shorn through the Fat Lady's face. Gripping the petrified canvas, he tried to uncurl it and get a proper look at the edge.

"What on earth are you looking for?" The headmistress was standing but stayed behind her desk, and it took both hands for Feliciano to wrestle a corner of the frayed, hardened canvas over so he could see... a classical temple, a rendition of a columned pantheon with a Greek roof. But-

No, with those columns it wasn't Greek, it was Roman.

The shape of the leaves, the cluster of grapes hanging from the edge of the portrait.

They weren't cyprus trees. These were tall and narrow, growing straight up and groomed for height and symmetry in the Tuscan style.

The Fat Lady was sitting in a Tuscan vineyard.

"Bruticus the Barbarian." He repeated the name and then stood up, stepping out of the portrait frame and walking around it quickly. "What was his background?"
"The subject's?"

"No, the portrait itself, what was painted as his background?" Headmistress McGonagall didn't answer him. "What's in the background? I have no reason to walk so close to Ravenclaw house and I don't remember what it looked like!"

"It was a town." A cranky old witch in black robes edged in Ravenclaw blue snapped, resting in a frame several feet over McGonagall's desk and looking down at him disdainfully. "It was some small red-roofed little town he was always going on about conquering and plundering, the brute. Before you ask, yes, it was probably Italy but I don't honestly care."

The Tuscan Flower Girl had hung near the Infirmary and been resting in a garden of flowers under the shade of an orchard.

The Venetian Gondolier had been on the canals with a view of the city beyond his lover's apartment.

"That doesn't make any sense..." Didn't it? He wanted to say yes, but- "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"Vargas?" He walked away from the painting, he had to think, he had to just process what was coming at him. His thoughts kept running back the exact same way, but why? "What are you thinking of? Mister Vargas."

"It's me." He didn't like how that sounded, he never really liked the way that sounded. There was so much power in words like the ones he was about to speak, something more impressive than wizard's spells or wand taps and wild flickers. "I'm always in the background."

"A little boy like you?" Another portrait spoke up and was silenced by McGonagall, which was good but it still came too late to stop him from lashing out. He didn't like the conclusion he was coming too, he wasn't ready to accept it as truth.

"I am Italy." He announced, voice full and stressing the charm resting cold and hard against his chest, the chain choking the maturity out of his words while they struggled to command the respect that he, has a nation, deserved. "And if my image alone becomes the thread that binds these attacks together, then that is an assault on me."

The portraits went still and absolutely silent, almost like they were normal, non-magical renditions of dead witches and wizards. Headmistress McGonagall had reclaimed her seat behind her desk, and she was as deathly still as the rest of her predecessors.

"What paintings cannot be salvaged I trust Hogwarts will burn, except for the frame of the Venetian Gondolier which I request you send to my residence in Rome. If you don't know why, then check the name on the back corner."

Headmistress McGonagall needed a moment to swallow and find her words again, and it was just enough time for Feliciano to taste the blood in his mouth and catch the metallic reek of magic oozing out of his pores. The charm was fighting so hard to keep him wrapped up in such a tiny little body that it was beginning to physically hurt where it touched his skin. There was a reason the Representation of North Italy wasn't a small child anymore.

"I take this to mean you will be returning in September?"

"It does." And he had to stop himself from speaking again for a few moments, swallowing the thick copper welling up in his throat from his empty stomach. Several deep breaths later, his temper was back under control and the pain began receding across his chest and along the links of the chain.
"And I apologize for my temper, Headmistress McGonagall. People like me... we aren't meant to handle threats lightly."

"I don't imagine so..." Her gaze drifted away from him briefly, resting on the ticking face of a brass clock before she found her voice again. "You will have to recover quickly I'm afraid, the carriages won't wait more than another ten minutes for your arrival."

"Thank you for your understanding, Headmistress."

"And thank you... for your intervention this morning, Mister Vargas."

With the politest nod he could manage, Feliciano let himself out of Headmistress McGonagall's office. Thus ended his second year at Hogwarts.
"And what if I don't want to spend the summer at Malfoy Manor?"

"See that's the part where you don't have a choice in the matter."

Arthur had a great deal to say about that in his own London basement, watching Scotland use his wand and carefully draw spirals of red light out of the watch face sitting on the table between them.

The idea of putting the charm on again was enough to give Arthur hives. He hadn't known how cut off he'd been feeling until he'd taken it off almost two weeks ago. It had been like breaking the surface of a deep, dark ocean current to breathe and feel the sun once again.

He felt his industries like the blood surging through his veins, the daily rhythm of his people pounding like the heart in his chest. His senses were eased from the grain of childhood wonder and confusion and his sense of self-worth was brilliantly restored. He didn't know how he'd ever lowered himself to hiding in Scotland's shadow, but those fragile feelings were crushed and he felt like himself again.

All of the restrictions on who he was were meant to help, and they did! Arthur hadn't felt the rapid flooding in his low-lying areas that winter. It felt like he'd betrayed himself by not being aware of it, but at the same time it had kept his cover from being irreversibly blown to pieces. There would have been no going back if he'd started clawing at Hogwarts' doors trying to get out and put on a uniform so he could help hand out nutritional packets and bottled water.

The charm was... rather like a jam on the scale of his soul, or a rod in the way of a pendulum's natural swing. There would always be the external self: Arthur, and the internal one: England. Those two sides would always exist whether they were weights on a scale, sides of a coin, and so on.

But, due to the desperate need to keep the internal on the inside, it meant... being cut off from it—being cut off from himself. He was still English and he was still England and he was still the former British Empire, but he wasn't quite part of the United Kingdom. He almost wasn't quite England.

It was supposed to be a conscious thing. He could breathe in and know what the weather was like over Liverpool and if traffic conditions were being maintained in greater London. He could wake up in the morning and understand that his parliament had been sitting all night on a particularly nonsensical bill and know what to expect from a day at work in Westminster.

When wearing the charm however, it became a subconscious thing. He didn't wake up in the Hogwarts Dungeon and go 'oh yes, bad day for the markets', he had to read the paper just like anyone else and check the numbers. And he still checked them; he still had the mental stamina for it unlike the physical side that was so desperately lacking.

But the body had to be small and it had to be easy to wear out, despite how much physical stress it was starting to put on him.

After two years of wearing the charm there was a soreness in his wrist and creeping up his arm whenever it was off, like he was experiencing growing-pains all over again from bones shrinking and lengthening.

He'd lost weight as well, not what he'd expected on a diet of mashed potatoes and sausage from Hogwarts' kitchens, but only a week looking in his own mirror had confirmed it. He wasn't lacking nutrients from food, his body was simply wasting away what parts of itself wouldn't fit within the
confines of the charm. Broken down muscles and thinning hair: the visible traits of nationhood vanishing from his body like the conscious thoughts from his mind.

He couldn't sense his armed forces, so his muscle-mass melted away.

He wasn't in contact with his working population, therefore the callouses on his hands were gone along with most of the strength in his long fingers.

By spending so much time with such a small minority, his voice felt raspy and hurt to use after too few hours of standing and speaking.

Whatever the combined effect was on him however, it had to be doubly hard on Italy. At least Arthur was still operating in his basic language and surrounded by children and professionals who hailed from his lands as much as Scotland's. It was necessary to give the poor bastard a break and go home to properly recharge.

"What did Italy tell you happened in McGonagall's office this year at term's end?" Scotland asked. He gave Arthur a serious look over the steady glow of the altered charm as it was tweaked and shifted, the jam inching back a few spaces so maybe Arthur would feel a bit more like himself while looking more like himself come the start of August.

"He said he thinks the paintings are as much an attack on himself as they are on the school."

"Exactly, which is ironic considerin' which one of you wants Hogwarts shut down."

"He never actually said he'd close the school you know."

"Not to you, but what do you think Lovino and I gab about while you two are off playing study-buddies?" He made a very desperate point by saying that, something which didn't sit well with Arthur at all. "Keep an eye on him, Arthur. If Italy isn't satisfied at the end of seven years at this school then you know what'll happen."

"Well Hogwarts isn't doing itself any favours!"

"Exactly." Scotland raised his voice just enough to annoy Arthur with his tone, the light finally dying down on the table before he picked the watch up and held it to his ear to make sure it was still ticking. "So that means that while Vargas keeps the pressure on McGonagall, you and I need to keep making nice with the Malfoys. And the Higgs and the Gamps, even the Flints if you can swing it, boy. That Gloria Flint's father is on the council and that's just as good as chatting up a Professor."

"You know I didn't make friends with Scorpius because of his father." It felt very necessary to point that out, and not just because Scotland was advancing on him with that watch.

"See now that I believe. I almost choked when your first letter mentioned that family." Because the entire Kirkland family had been involved in the war and set on bringing down dark wizards like the Malfoys... "But there's no sense wasting a good opportunity. You be a polite, attentive little guest and hopefully the Professor'll say something that'll let us know how things are progressing on the staff-side of things."

Scotland held the watch out for adjustments and Arthur hesitated. He was angry at himself for it, but couldn't make his arm rise to take the charm.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sorry." But rather than try to explain he forced his body to obey, reaching up just to watch
Scotland's hand pull back without letting the magic grab him.

"Don't go lyin' to me now, boy." Scotland's red brows were down over his blue eyes, his skin almost completely white so it was obvious he was spending so much more time inside now than out and about during the day. He'd tapped out a cigarette a few minutes ago to focus on the charm but the mild nicotine stains on his teeth were visible when he clenched his jaw in irritation. Arthur had to fight hard for the words and Scotland interrupted him before he could win. "Look, it's not blackmail and it ain't in bad faith either, is it? You're actually friends with that Malfoy kid and that's fine, I ain't gonna tease you about basic human behaviour."

"It's not about the Malfoys." Arthur stumbled, closing his eyes and giving his head a shake while his hands waved away the idea. "And it's not the plan, it's a fine idea and I approve of it. Malfoy Manor is actually rather pleasant now so I don't really care about going."

"Then what's the matter?"

"I just-" No, he couldn't be this petulant and start acting like a little child again just because the charm was near him. Was he England or was he not?" Nevermind, just give the damned thing over, will you?"

"Not until you tell me why you're gettin' all quiet all of the sudden." He didn't bloody well want to explain! "England!"

"I don't like it!" And he didn't like being yelled at either! "I don't like the way it feels, I don't like what it does to me! It's unnatural and I know why! I understand why: I helped you design the damned thing myself, didn't I? So I get it!" And he just... "I just don't like it."

He ended with that, looking down and away from Scotland for a moment so he could take a few steady breaths and regroup after shouting like an infant for no reason. He made himself speak harshly: "Now stop coddling me and let me put the damned thing on. I'm a fully mature nation, thank you, and I can deal with this myself."

He held a hand out for the watch and looked up so Scotland knew he meant it, but instead of giving in and just letting them get on with it, Scotland was the one who hesitated now.

"Well Christ, Arthur, if you feel that way about it then why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"Because it doesn't matter." He shot back, not in the mood to be looked after or handled with a gentle tone of voice like that. The charm weakened him to the point where he began to act like a child, but it didn't make him one. "Every piece of that enchantment is there for a reason. We both know we can't take parts of it away without compromising the whole so stuff it and stop with the suspense."

Scotland was worrying his bottom lip between his teeth, an anxious tick that threatened to set Arthur's temper off properly this time. He didn't need that open look or the deep breath Scotland took before answering him!

"Fine, but only if you're sure."

"I'm damned sure now hand it over."

Scotland obeyed this time and Arthur's fingers flinched back when he touched the watch, pure will forcing his hand to close around the strap and face as he shut his eyes tight and felt the floor rip itself out from under him. A deafening roar of blood spun in his ears as his heart thundered and his stomach did flips. The room tilted wildly like he was lost at sea and moments from being ripped
sideways into the hurricane to drown.

He hit the floor and there was something large and warm supporting him, his temper held back by the sear of bile shooting up his throat only to be swallowed again around the need to breathe.

He hated it, two years of this and it wasn't getting any easier as they headed into the third. Arthur opened his eyes slowly and found his head resting hard between Scotland's shoulder and chest, his brother's arm wrapped around his side where Arthur's arms were locked in front of him like he was going to spew everywhere. He couldn't feel his legs, but they were slowly coming back...

London itself was starting to... fade.

"Let go of me, you git..." He hissed, but then he felt a large hand close around the back of his head instead, and the arm around his waist pulled him closer until he almost kicked back with the affront of being held.

"Not until that shaking stops." He didn't need Scotland's pity, he didn't need the brute's tall frame crouched in front of him reeking of cigarettes and the faded sweetness of pipe-smoke. How dare he think Arthur needed strong arms and the warmth of a steady heart-beat, it wasn't... like he could take... any... comfort...

"You're getting soft..." In... both possible senses.

"And you're defendin' my school." Damned right he was... "The least I can do, Arthur, is try and find a better alternative while you're there this year."

"Don't waste your time." He mumbled, face full of the blue summer tee his brother was wearing over black jeans. Arthur was still in the old white shirt and grey sweatpants he'd put on in preparation for the shrinking, and he didn't trust himself when his head was adjusted so his neck didn't hurt so much in this position. He closed his eyes again and...

"Don't waste your strength..." And...

And he woke up with late afternoon sunshine spilling over his bed what must have been hours later. The house was completely silent except for the ticking of a clock in his office and the quiet padding of his familiar, Crumpet. The Scottish fold cat had bent brown ears and patches of blonde fur over his white body, and jumped up next to him to sniff him and curl up in a ball under his arm.

He wasn't wearing the charm, and there was a cup of cold tea next to his bed with a letter from his idiot brother resting against it.

It was a monumental effort to reach for it, but he snagged it between two fingers and unfolded it in the summer light.

"Go back to sleep."

Hmph.

"I'll be at Malfoy Manor for dinner, gonna tell them you've had a bad fever all week and it just hasn't broken in time. Or that you flew your broom through the den and smashed grandma's urn, haven't made up my mind yet.

Adjustments are made on the watch; you look like a tuckered out 13-year-old boy when you wear it now.
Since you're home, you can look over that speech for Canada's Prime Minister: they'll be in town starting Thursday.

Be home by midnight.

Now get the fuck back to sleep."

So Arthur rolled back over, closed his eyes, and did exactly that.

"How long have you been in Italy? Do you like it? Ah! Yes, I speak German too, Bella, I'm very good at-"

"Stop flirting!"

Getting shouted at in one of his own cantinas wasn't very nice, but Feliciano was forced to make his exit when the pretty blonde German woman he'd been talking to burst out laughing and excused herself to step out into the bright summer sunshine. Returning to the table of friends with a sigh, he sat back down and looked up to one smirking face, one angry face, and one very tipsy friend.

"Japan, are you alright?"

"He's fine!" Germany snapped, bringing his voice back down where he was sitting with sunburn kissing his long cheeks and the rounded end of his nose. His sunglasses were hanging from the pocket of the white short-sleeved shirt he was wearing in the heat, thick arms dusted with pale blonde hair resting on the table next to their empty plates and the last of the bread and wine from their meal. "You're the one who needs to focus, after spending two years around flirty teenagers I'm amazed you still have the stamina for more flirting."

"But I haven't been around teenagers, I've been around little kids!" Feliciano happily corrected.

"Are you saying your kind can't tell the difference, Kraut?"

It was beyond rare for Lovino to agree to spend time around Germany and Feliciano knew to be thankful for every second of tolerance his brother showed. The almost-empty state of his wine glass was probably to thank for his patience, and Feliciano was quick to grab the dark green bottle in the middle of the table and tip it over his brother's glass.

"What- it's empty already?"

Lovino outright laughed at him.

"Blame that one." He chided, grinning and nodding his head to the fourth member of their party where Japan had his head down on the table after finishing his meal. His black hair was uncomfortably straight despite the heat, shoulders shaking slightly under the white collar and shoulders of his polo shirt. His camera was probably still around his neck, but Feliciano was a little concerned when Japan didn't really move except to keep shaking.

And singing.

"Is he really singing?" Feliciano asked, insisting at the same time that he hadn't been away from the table for that long.

"Sounds like it."
"You know how he gets when he's on vacation." Germany sounded like he was scolding Feliciano himself, and he didn't think that that was very fair. He wasn't the one warbling Okinawan beach songs under his breath!

"Should we put him in the car?"

"I say we put him on the train up to that stupid school of yours."

"In that case we'd have to make him younger than me." Feliciano pointed out, countering his brother where Lovino was putting on a smug grin and waved a hand to get their server's attention for more wine. "I don't think he'd like that."

"All the more reason to do it then."

"Could we please not talk about this in public?" Germany looked and sounded completely out of his comfort zone, squirming on his chair where he'd otherwise been either strict or at ease for the entire three day tour of Feliciano's best wineries.

After all, that was what Lovino had stuffed in that blue envelop while Feliciano had still been at Hogwarts: a brochure of central and northern Italian wineries, the best of his own orchards and sights. It was the closest Lovino had come to apologizing for that military disaster of a vacation last year, and the fact that he'd invited Germany and Japan without even asking Feliciano about it said how much sincerity was behind the gesture.

A car, a map, and a lot of wine all made for an excellent summer break between June and the end of August. There was only one major hiccup three days after the wine tour ended and his friends returned to Berlin and Tokyo respectively, and Feliciano felt like he handled the trio of owls with a great deal more decorum than Lovino. His brother had yelled and sworn and made a great big fuss about the broken window and the something that Feliciano had sworn to never, ever waste money on.

It put him in a funny kind of mood as summer wound down, because he almost forgot about the surprise delivery before he found it again while packing for London. A week before September first and the Hogwarts Express, Feliciano had to make his way back to England's private home for a bit of illicit magic in that much brighter and better organized basement. They also had plans to not wait until the very last minute to comb through Diagon Alley for their school books and supplies.

But that was just an idea, and it didn't mean they really kept to it.

"Is that a...?" Especially when Feliciano collected his baggage at the airport with England hovering next to him and Scotland out minding the car at Heathrow.

"Don't. England: don't speak." Because it was embarrassing to load up a trunk next to... it.

"Merlin's pants it really is..." Yes, it really was. "And you haven't even unwrapped it: Scorpius is going to have a fit."

"Since his father was mentioned by name in the letter that came with it, that means I get to beat him over the head with it, right?"

"There are over a thousand ways to foul a Seeker, Vargas, and I think that's officially one of them." Poor, naive England: he said it like Feliciano actually cared. "Oh buck up, it's not the worst reward anyone's ever gotten for keeping a Hogwarts student from expulsion." No.

But that didn't make a racing broom something that Feliciano wanted to explain at customs.
Third year was as unnecessarily hectic to get started as the previous two, which put Arthur and Scotland right at their wits end because how were they forever going through Diagon Alley at the very last moment every year?

"Ah, Mister Kirkland! Late again as always I see?"

The shopkeeper at Flourish and Bolts actually knew Scotland by face, that was how damned predictable the last-minute shopping for "that's not the right book!" and "wait we need a bronze cauldron this year?" had become.

By some miracle they did in fact make it to the Platform in time to catch the Hogwarts Express, but not without a few unexpected surprises along the way.

For one, it wasn't until they actually reached Platform Nine and Three Quarters and one of the old Slytherin first years walked by that Arthur realized, with a sudden gasp and then a brutal fight not to laugh, that they’d completely forgotten to make Italy any taller over summer break. They’d changed his face, but not his height. The poor man barely came up to Scorpius' chin when the next surprise ambled over in the form of both Mrs. and Professor Malfoy on the platform.

"Fancy seeing you at the station, Professor!" Scotland took over for the three of them by marvelling Professor Malfoy's rare break from surgical white to appear in a grey suit, the silver snakes done into his purple tie writhing when the Professor laughed a little bit. "They've got you as hall monitor then this year? Have to keep all these rug-rats in line?"

"Not exactly, but I am going to be on the Express this afternoon." Arthur was plenty curious about this, but Scorpius had other ideas and was currently trying to get a look at something that Italy, with his lacking height, was struggling to hide. "There was some urgent business at Saint Mungo's throughout the middle of August, and I simply couldn't leave things half-finished."

Scotland's reply didn't matter because Scorpius let out a sudden gasp and his whole face broke into a grin. His chin looked like it was getting longer and his cheeks were thinning out, the top half of his face not quite sure what shape it wanted to be as the beginnings of teenage awkwardness were nipping at his pale features and twisting them with uneven growth. But he still had sharp grey eyes, and they were completely focused on what was making Italy dance uncomfortably and then shake his head with a sharp hushing gesture that Scorpius ignored.

"That's a broom, isn't it!"

"No-"

"You finally got a racing broom! You're going to make the team then?"

"Scorpius I-"

"Ah! That's right," Scotland sighed, breaking the conversation he'd been having and switching topics with the way Scorpius was now actively trying to get behind Italy and get his hands on the paper-wrapped broomstick Italy was dancing furiously to keep out of reach. "Professor Malfoy, before you and the boys head off: I forgot to pass a message on from the older Mister Vargas. He sends his thanks for the good word you gave to Mister Adams last year. Admittedly, a racing broom is probably a bit much, but theirs is a genuine thanks none the less."

"Well, Mister Kirkland," Professor Malfoy answered smoothly and with a pleased smile, "you'll
remind the older Mister Vargas that not only did his younger brother save the Adams family from a massive embarrassment, but he also rescued Miss Adams' promising career at Gringotts bank."

Professor Malfoy looked so satisfied to say those words, either because he was inches from doting on Italy for the achievement or he just loved hearing his own voice praising Slytherins past and present.

"Bring it on the train with you- oh won't you?"

"I'm not sitting with it in the great hall!"

Italy was fully prepared to toss the wrapped broom right under the train's wheels as their luggage was stowed and an urgent whistle from the bright red engine got them all to hurry up with their good-byes. The professor and his wife shared a kiss and a flurry of last minute reminders about various potions and paperwork, and Scorpius was told to stop harassing Italy because Quidditch really was such an awful sport and she thought him brilliant for wanting nothing to do with it.

"I'll be in contact, as always, I'm sure Lovino'll be sending a howler along in due time."

"Don't remind me!" Italy cried.

Much waving and carrying-on later and the four of them, Professor Malfoy obviously included, were all on board the train.

"Now, I won't go embarrassing you so I'm off to the staff car instead. Scorpius." Probably the last time between now and Christmas that Professor Malfoy would address his son by name made Scorpius spin around, his father quickly pushing a fat gold galleon into his palm before raising a finger to his half-smiling lips. And then, with a wink, he was gone.

Scorpius seemed absolutely thrilled with his new bounty, weighing the heavy coin in his hand with a flustered smile right up until he turned around and saw Arthur and Italy both looking straight at him. Arthur didn't hesitate.

"Snacks are on you then."

"But this is Hogsmeade money!"

"You can buy us Hogsmeade snacks too," Italy chirped, both of them fully prepared to ignore how immature it was to expect a child to pay for their chocolates and sweets for the afternoon.

Being in third year didn't magically make finding a compartment any easier, but there was a very real understanding when they opened one compartment door to find a cluster of five petrified children that they were obligated to leave unsorted students alone at all costs. They weren't wearing their Hogwarts uniforms yet to declare themselves Slytherins, but it was simply common decency.

They did end up finding one space near the back end of the train as they pulled out of the station, and about ten minutes later a frantic looking Eliza Gamp shyly knocked and was welcomed in with smiles and genuine assurances that yes, of course she could sit down with them.

"It felt like I had to search the entire train... twice." She really did look upset, the poor thing, eyes darting around the compartment several times only to come back and rest on her folded hands. Her feet were planted solidly on the floor where she was sitting, hands pressed to her grey skirt so hard she was going to leave wrinkles in it. "I thought I saw Higgs on the platform but he vanished up a different door with one of his duelling club friends. Then there was Flint but- oh, I'm just rambling now, I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Italy soothed.
"I can leave if you want me to, I'll understand."

"For goodness sake, just stay!" Scorpius was a lot less patient, but much more to the point. "When are you going to believe that you aren't a bother or anything like that? The only thing that's bothersome is you apologizing for being a bother in the first place, so keep everything else and just stop that. We're your friends, remember?"

She looked petrified trying to sort out how to feel about his words, but Italy found a way to broker easier conversation by pulling out a copy of their new third year schedule and getting them to talk about it.

Divination with Professor Firenze, a detail that had Italy practically bouncing because his name was the Italian word for Florence. Care of Magical Creatures with Professor Hagrid, and Scorpius went completely pale and shuffled back on his seat trying to maintain composure.

"That... that damned book bit me!" He stuttered, curling and uncurling his fingers rapidly like he could still feel it trying to sink its teeth into him. "Snarling, nasty thing, I can't stand it."

"I haven't taken the buckle off mine yet." Arthur acknowledged, having to think hard about which book Scorpius was talking about only to remember that one of their new books for this year had growled at them in the shop.

"Is... is it alive?" Eliza asked softly, recovering her voice and looking bewildered when Scorpius gave her a critical glare and Italy just shrugged because he was as out of touch as Arthur. "I know which one you mean with the red strap on it, but mine just fell open when I touched it."

"Well then your magic's better than mine because I wouldn't be taking the class at all if it weren't required."

They fell into a discussion of what they expected their new classes to be like, completely ignoring a disturbing change to the schedule's roster in favour of listening to Scorpius hum and haw about the fact that his father was the prime candidate to replace Professor Slughorn as Potions Master at Hogwarts.

"He's already School Healer and Slytherin Head, and he teaches the Advanced Potions classes because Slughorn just can't anymore." How Scorpius felt about the idea of his father taking on additional work was clear by the way he wrinkled his nose and shook his head like there was a foul smell. "But on top of that he still works at Saint Mungo's during the summer. If he became Potions Master then I'd never see him ever."

"You do your best to avoid him at school anyways though, don't you?" Gamp pointed out, shyly peering up from behind a stack of playing cards fanned in front of her nose. Italy had been trying to teach them a game for the last ten minutes, but the conversation was still more engaging than him forgetting his own rules.

"Because he's not my dad at Hogwarts, he's Professor Malfoy." Scorpius answered, abandoning his cards all together when Italy told him one thing and then remembered that no, the Jack of Clubs did something else. "You notice he never talks to me directly either if anyone else is around, it'll be something like 'Mister Kirkland tell your friend' or 'Professor Binns tell that one Slytherin' or something like that."

"You have to admit that it'd be about a hundred times worse if he was all 'Oh son are you wearing the same shirt again today?" Arthur pointed out, watching Italy collect the confused deck of cards and crack open the compartment door looking for the snack trolley. "Imagine him coming down
Scorpius was so scandalized by the mere idea that he did absolutely anything for the rest of the train ride to keep his father out of the chatter. It didn't change the fact that they were overdue for a new Potions teacher, but it was an excuse to stop talking about Scorpius and focus on Italy instead.

He barely reached Scorpius' chin, but Arthur almost killed himself laughing when Eliza stood up next to him to help pay the snack witch and Italy wasn't even at her shoulder. It was a very near thing when Italy turned a glare on him that Arthur didn't burst into flames, because that level of wandless magic was certainly within his grasp.

"Stop laughing at him!" And Eliza was quick to defend Italy too. "I'm sure you'll grow twelve inches this year, Vargas, don't worry."

"Tough luck, really," Scorpius agreed, Arthur holding his head between his knees trying to bring his hysterics under control because it was so damned stupid for them to forget something like that. "At least you know Higgs will keep the Ravenclaws from stepping on you."

"It's not the Ravenclaws I'm afraid of." It was the Gryffindors. Officially being the smallest child in third year was going to make Italy's life a heavy burden until they could tweak the charm to at least give him another inch or two. At least he had his duelling to protect him.

By the time the sun set and the Hogwarts express slowed down, Arthur was quite pleased with his extended endurance that meant he wasn't yawning and ready for bed just getting to the carriages. They did finally run into Higgs in the great hall, and somehow he had the audacity to scold them for abandoning him to find his own way with a group of fourth year Slytherins.

"Don't ever do that again, Vargas, or I'll sock you one I swear." Higgs said it as much as a joke as he did a real threat, the farcical part of it coming out when Charles' wide face broke into a giant grin and he just sat there laughing and pointing, hamming it up at the table to ask who was taller: Feliciano Vargas, or Albus Potter's little sister.

Italy was fed-up, but at least he sang the school song and then his spirits rose with the sorting ceremony. It was a sweeping success for Slytherin when they claimed eight shy looking first years, the largest class in two years, and the feast was about to begin.

About to, but then Headmistress McGonagall raised her hands for silence and slowly stood, her ancient face exhausted and yet still clutching firmly to her respectable airs and the graces that let her command a sea of chatty young students with merely a gesture and a smile.

"Before we begin our feast this evening, I have but one happy announcement to make." And she did seem pleased, something that was refreshing while the other members of staff seemed to be smiling and nodding happily. Arthur's eyes found Professor Malfoy leaning on one elbow to see further down the table, but even he was smiling and completely at ease while ignoring Longbottom completely for once. Whatever the announcement, it had nothing to do with Houses.

"It brings me great pleasure to introduce our new History of Magic Instructor: Professor Alice Huntington."

Polite applause from all four tables ushered a mature witch to her feet, pretty lilac robes complimenting the slight wash of red in her curled hair, just enough frill to remain tasteful while she smiled brightly with what looked like a string of massive pearls around her throat. Arthur had a hard time seeing anything more than a straight long nose and narrow lips painted red, but given how the rest of the head table was smiling and applauding merrily, there were no ill feelings.
Not until Eliza asked a terrifying question in the dying moments of the applause:

"But how do you replace a ghost?"

Arthur stopped clapping, and he felt his smile die and fall off his face.

Only tomorrow would tell.
The History of Sport

Binns was gone.

The Slytherin commons was a safe place where the first years could come running and hide when the school over their heads was too mean or scary, but that made it hard for the upperclassmen to talk about the reality of the new Professor's position. Feliciano wouldn't be able to forgive himself if he terrified one of the new first years or made them cry by telling them that they'd come to a school where even the dead were in danger of being hunted down.

Binns, the Baron, Peeves, and all it took was twenty minutes into their first third-year charms class before David Baker of Hufflepuff attempted stilted conversation at the desk he and Feliciano now permanently shared.

"So, um..." He had his head down and he was scratching notes onto a piece of parchment when he tried talking, the two of them copying sets of glyphs for a bit of wandless practice first before they could trace the patterns over the paper or into the air. "About Binns..."

"Do you know what Professor Huntington is like?" Hufflepuffs had different schedules than Slytherins, so Feliciano kept his voice on the same low pitch as Baker and even nudged his ink well over so they could both use it when it was clear Baker's was already running low.

"She's alright, really nice actually, but... Binns being gone is... it's kinda like your house ghost vanishing, isn't it? Unless he's back?"

The Bloody Baron wasn't back. Feliciano had watched Scorpius almost pull a muscle in his shoulder rattling the Baron's chain the night before trying to summon him, but the new house Prefect had told him to stop making such a racket and sit down again with nothing to show for it.

Third year brought a lot of shuffling to their schedules. Three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays they began the morning in Herbology with the Gryffindors, went to Charms with Hufflepuff, had Transfiguration with Ravenclaw, and ended off in Creevey's Defense Against the Dark Art's class with Gryffindor again, unless it was Friday night when they were expected in the Astronomy Tower with Hufflepuff.

Tuesdays and Thursdays were dominated by their new experience with Care of Magical Creatures with Ravenclaws, followed by History of Magic and more Ravenclaws, an escape to Potions with Gryffindor, and then Divination with Hufflepuff. All houses shared three classes together; it was confusing, but not impossible to keep straight.

There was a lot of apprehension about stepping into History of Magic for the first time after summer, and Feliciano's own distrust of the subject putting him even more on edge than the other Slytherins. But he was happily surprised instead.

Professor Binns had been dead for a long time, as much as a century, and his classroom had looked it. Piled high with books and half-discarded things that he'd just put down one day and then been rendered a ghost the next and unable to move. Feliciano had never realized how large the history room on the third floor actually was because of all the piled books and musty cob-webs. He hadn't even known there were two extra windows in the stone walls.

The smell of dust was completely gone when they walked in alongside the Ravenclaws, in fact there was a very faint, very refreshing floral scent in the air and a soft autumn breeze from the open
windows along the far wall helped too up. He hadn't known they could open at all!

The hard benches had been given pale green cushions that made them so much comfier than before, and the musty, age-stained rafters were hidden by draping curtains of sky blue hanging from gold chains. Professor Huntington was a mature witch in her 30s but she was probably younger in spirit than Longbottom or Malfoy, poised on Professor Binns’ dais with sunlight dancing off the lacy trim of her soft orange robe with its gold highlights. Her hair was red and curly in nature- pressed into even ringlets around her head and leaving her neck bare. The bright red lipstick she wore was obvious, but it was meant to be when she stood there with such a vibrant smile, her brown eyes following the students as they filtered in and stumbled a little to see the room so transformed.

When Feliciano looked around at the walls, he was startled to see a wall mural at the front of the room with a to-scale map of the world painted on it, enchanted colours making the water ripple at the coast of Africa, clouds swirling like satellite imagery over the oceans and washing over the land masses in a hypnotizing, and incredibly soothing way. Had she done it herself? He wanted to know. He wanted to tell England how happy he was to have such a literal breath of fresh air in the class he hated most.

When the entire class was seated however, there was a minor hiccup. Professor Huntington's smile dimmed a little bit, rocking on her feet where there was the shy clunk of heeled shoes tapping under the edge of her robe. Her eyes watched the back of the room until it was almost five minutes into the lesson, and then she let her gaze sweep over the Ravenclaws, counting, then the Slytherins, counting again.

Feliciano couldn't help himself and swung his head around too, counting twelve Ravenclaws to seven Slytherins: everybody was here.

Professor Huntington turned to look over her shoulder at a large brass clock on the wall, one of the only things Feliciano half-recognized from last year since it had been polished for the first time in centuries. She knew how much time she was wasting, and looked back at her class with an exasperated little sigh.

"This just can't be everyone." Her accent made him jump- she was American!

Feliciano and England shared a quick glance where Feliciano was sitting alone again, the odd number of the class meaning someone from Slytherin had to bear the brunt so it might as well be him today. Scorpius had volunteered to take tomorrow's solo shift.

"One, two, three, four..." Professor Huntington walked over to the speaker's podium at the side of her classroom's dais and started counting something, probably a list of names to help her get to know students. She suddenly gasped and looked up at them in shock, eyes shooting to everybody's throats before her radiant smile came back and she scoffed at herself, hands coming up to clasp her face as she giggled and stomped one foot in embarrassment.

"I was waiting for Hufflepuffs! What a first impression to make- I'm so sorry, class: welcome to History of Magic!"

The rest of the lesson was devoted to a short lecture on why people should even bother studying history, and it was the sort of thing that made a Nation's heart sing. Learning from past mistakes, contextualizing current trends and decisions, the solemnity, the pride, the reality that everything in history was something that actually happened. She understood it, there was a passion in the way she spoke that just- Feliciano was almost in love, and the enraptured look on England's face when he somehow pried himself away to look at him said the same thing: this was going to be their favourite lesson of the day.
And it only got better when after the lecture, there was a brief quiz that Professor Huntington swore six times would not impact their grade in any way what so ever, she just wanted to know where Professor Binns had left off so she could continue to teach them. The horrified look on his Ravenclaw classmates' faces frightened him for about thirty seconds, but then Feliciano read the first question himself.

*When was the Renaissance, and where is it credited as having begun? Give a range of dates.*

He almost burst into song; he was so happy.

*In the Northumbrian Goblin Rebellion of 1441-*

Okay he skipped that one because he still didn't know, but:

*Approximately when did wand use first appear in Europe?*

Feliciano couldn't remember exactly when he'd first seen one, but he didn't need an *exact* answer either. It hadn't been too long after his grandfather's death though.

*When was the last Muggle war where Magic folk enrolled and served to fight?*

There were too many answers to that one because there was just no way to track muggle-born wizards from other nations, so he went with the two safest answers: the First and Second World Wars.

Not everything on the quiz was easy, and several questions made him sit there with absolutely zero recollection of why pointed hats were magically superior to rounded or dual-pointed ones. But he actually knew some of what was being asked, and that was more than two previous years of this awful class had done for him.

He left the lesson on his toes, body vibrating with excitement and the disappointment of having to wait another two days before he could come back again.

"She's wonderful, isn't she?" England caught up with him before he was even out of the room, getting a grip on Feliciano's robe and tugging hard.

"Oh, she's fabulous! You have to thank Alfred."

"Did you see that question about Gutenberg?"

"I'll write to Ludwig about it tonight! Do you think he'll be flattered or creeped a little by it?"

For once the two of them even went so far as to forget the rest of their house mates, the cloud they were walking on was so high up that the rest of the school didn't mean a damned thing to them. They had a real history teacher, and even if she only repeated things England already knew or Feliciano had no capacity to hold onto or recollect, she still understood history.

Third year, by the looks of things, was going to be so much better than imagined.

Third year was going to be so much worse than expected.

Their first divination class was cancelled, the upset sending the Slytherin and Hufflepuff students back to their dorm in confusion to wait for dinner.
On Thursday of that week, they went back to the divination room and sat there for an hour without sight or sign of their professor. It meant the lot of them got the jump on their Charms homework since they were the same class for that lesson too, but as far as fortune-telling went, it was a wash.

It was worth asking the fourth and fifth years about, but they were just as confused because Professor Firenze had been present for all of their lessons and had given the same level of outstanding attention and care that he always did.

Arthur, admittedly, was rather miffed to be overlooked like this. If Firenze had been lazy like Slughorn, neglectful like Longbottom, or severe like Parkinson then maybe it would have been tolerable, but Firenze had such a good reputation at the school.

Someone else with a wonderful reputation was Professor Huntington, who if Arthur hadn't been trapped in a thirteen-year-old's body he would have been very quick to assure the new Professor of what an outstanding job she was already doing even after only two lessons. Even Feliciano, whose disastrous performance in History of Magic was well-known, was already doing so much better because her lectures had a taste of world-history glazed over top.

By giving him context for what had been happening on the continent either as influences or results of Goblin rebellions or fashion trends, Italy actually stood a chance of remembering the facts because he could connect them to his own memories and history.

Huntington even earned bonus points from Italy when, as their second week revved up and their Divination classes continued to simply not happen, she revealed that she'd gone abroad to study for several years in a number of Italian cities.

"You did? Really! Which ones? Please tell me!" She scolded him for breaking into Italian after another Thursday lesson, probably the first time Arthur had seen her task someone despite how gently it happened.

"Now, now, Mister Vargas, this is an English school and we speak English here."

"I thought it was Scottish? Should we speak Scots instead?"

She laughed dotingly over him for his quip and sent them on their way, clearly forgetting that sass was worth losing points over the same way it slipped her mind that excellent factual recall was worth giving points. It was simply an effect of her never having been a Hogwarts student before becoming a teacher.

For the fourth lesson straight, Divination didn't happen. Gloria Flint was outraged by the end of the evening and loudly declared that she was going to the infirmary to complain to Professor Malfoy. And then, of all people, she marched straight up to Scorpius in the common room and decided to drag him into it.

"And you! You're coming with me."

"What? Why me?" Scorpius had his Care of Magical Creatures book tethered to his chair and had been trying to feed it bits of quill fuzz when Gloria took him roughly by the arm and started yanking on his robe to make him stand.

"Because you're Professor Malfoy's son! He'll listen to you better than he will me."

"You're mad! I'm not going up there-"

"Yes, you are!"
In the end they all wound up going because Margaret Finnick was right there to grab Scorpius by the other arm and drag him from his chair, which made Eliza pipe up that they should leave him alone. The girls turned on Eliza at once until she started crying, which put Higgs in a mood while Italy tried to calm her down.

With his entire year getting ready to tear itself apart, Arthur aimed his wand at the ceiling and let off the loudest flash-bang spell he could muster without hurting anyone.

"That's enough!" He shouted, getting all six of them to quiet right down while Finnick jumped several times trying to get the frightened sting out of her spine from being closest to him, she looked like she was about to cry like Gamp for it. "Honestly! We're all going!"

So, they all did. Arthur was at the head of their little train as they took the long, winding path up to the fourth floor infirmary from the dungeons. Someone mentioned the secret passage before getting the brisk reminder that it was a straight vertical climb instead of a fast and easy slide.

They made good time getting to the hospital wing and the doors opened up smoothly, Arthur glancing at Italy where he was happily trotting next to him as they passed high white beds and starched privacy curtains. The sun was fading quickly through the windows while ambient light from the floor and fabric gave the infirmary a twilight glow.

Professor Malfoy wasn't standing in the middle of the hospital wing like Arthur had somehow come to expect, it wasn't as if his job was just to hover there doing nothing all day. They followed the length of the chamber until they reached his office door, a gentle light under the jamb telling them there was at least a candle or two lit inside even if he wasn't there.

"We should leave." Scorpius hissed, and Arthur turned around in time to watch Margaret Finnick turn such a look on him from down her nose.

"You warty toad, what are you so scared of?"

"I don't know- bothering the professor?"

"He's your dad!"

"Not at school!"

Scorpius kept his voice down for his argument while Miss Flint grew absolutely sick of waiting and gave Arthur a rude shove to get him out of her way, completely neglecting to give Italy the same rough treatment as she marched up and knocked twice on the door.

"Enter."

They couldn't all fit inside, but Flint did open the door and then gave an expectant look at the rest of them to come up behind her like obedient little followers. Arthur chaffed against her attitude much like Scorpius did with Finnick, but all seven third years did come closer and there was a stilted silence on their end as they heard Professor Malfoy, hidden in the tall chair that was turned away from the door so he could work, speak.

"I'm surprised you care so much, Horace, but as I told you I won't have these marked until-" Arthur thought he saw a very familiar stack of red potions on Professor Malfoy's desk before the professor himself leaned over in his chair to address whoever he thought was there.

"Miss Flint, Mister Kirkland." He was surprised to see students standing there instead, and calmly vanished back behind his chair so he could stand. When he stepped back into view, he paused at the
side of his chair when he realized... "Vargas, Gamp, Higgs, Finnick..." There was a gap where he
didn't call Scorpius' name, but he obviously saw him judging by the uncomfortable shuffle going on
behind the rest of them.

"Come to run me out of the school then?" Professor Malfoy joked, pushing his chair back so it was
right up against the desk before he waved them all to crowd into the circular office. "Open rebellion
by the third years? I warn you, I don't fight fairly when threatened."

He made light of the situation but also took it rather seriously, the office door swinging shut behind
them before with a flick of Professor Malfoy's wand, books began tumbling from the shelves and
stacking themselves into seven little seats, a simple turn of the hand welcoming them to sit.

"It's not about you at all, Professor, we promise." Finnick gasped, sounding shocked that he could
joke about such things and testing Arthur not to roll his eyes at her urgent tone. "It's Professor
Firenze, he's been absolutely dreadful!"

"Ah, he gave you a test that was just a blank bit of parchment?" Malfoy asked, his wand dancing
idly next to him as different herbs hanging over their heads began shedding leaves, one bookshelf
creeping to the side so the Professor's cauldron could appear and take water and different ingredients
quietly in the background. "Yes, he does tend to do that from time to time. I recommend detailing
whichever planet comes to mind, he's very fond of Mars."

"No, Professor, it's not that." Higgs grunted, Arthur having taken a spot along the far edge of the
semi-circle so if he tried, he could see everyone in their class except for Italy, who was on his other
side. "

"I've never had a class of students complain about going for an evening walk around the grounds."

"That's not it either..." Eliza murmured.

Arthur didn't know why he could smell chocolate until he saw a little bronze cup of it come down to
hover in front of his nose, exquisitely pleased with the treat as he took the floating vessel and tasted
the frothing cocoa. He even caught a touch of mint mixed in with the sweetness that warmed him up
just right. He didn't feel compelled to say anything as he enjoyed his drink.

The nations weren't intimidated by their Head of House, and Scorpius probably wasn't either given
how desperately bored he looked where he was sitting in the middle of the semi-circle. He held his
cup to his mouth and scowled at the back of Flint's head with Gamp awkwardly sitting between him
and Higgs. Italy and Arthur knew the Professor was a fair man, Scorpius was more concerned with
not being humiliated in front of his father and peers, and Higgs had been quite happy to have a spare
lesson block for September. What Eliza thought of the issue was irrelevant because she didn't say
another word as Finnick and Flint took charge.

"We haven't had a single lesson yet! We go to the room but the Professor either doesn't open the
door or he doesn't show up at all!"

"It's been two weeks, Professor! Why, Julianna was telling us that by mid-September last year she'd
already divined that Slytherin would take a terrible loss in Quidditch: and we did." Scorpius' face
looked a little bit like murder when Finnick made that declaration.

"But this is so much more important than Quidditch!" Nevermind, Scorpius really was going to
murder both of them. Arthur was trying not to burst into giggles with his cocoa. "Where's the
Professor gone off to if everyone else gets to see the future but not us? Has he left the school?"
"Not unless he took Professor Desford with him," The Professors soothed. "The two of them were having an enthusiastic chat about flight in the Staff Room this evening." Oh my...

Arthur felt Italy elbow him gently in the ribs and just gave a cheeky grin into his cup, nodding to show that yes, his thoughts momentarily went same way. The difference between being two dirty old men and two immature little boys was very ill-defined, so the nations just enjoyed the vulgar joke and went back to listening. That probably wasn't it at all.

But you know what they said about witches and broomsticks.

Professor Malfoy promised to speak to Professor Hadrian, the smiling witch who took care of Muggle Studies and was head of Hufflepuff house, and then approach Professor Firenze in the morning. The third years were invited to stay and finish off their cocoa, and were granted a small silver slip of waxy paper that granted them permission to head directly to the dorms via the secret passage. The hall-pass had a timer enchantment on it that would cause it to disappear if they took more than the generous fifteen minutes he allotted the seven of them to return to the Slytherin Dormitory with after dark.

They descended through the castle quietly and for the most part with contentment, and that wrapped up the end of their second week back at school.

Scorpius didn't forgive Flint and Finnick until the weekend finally arrived, and even then, forgive was sort of not the right word.

"Vargas! Go get your broom!" It was more like he went back to ignoring the two girls and harassing Feliciano instead, because it didn't matter how far under his pillow Feliciano tried shoving his head, he had first Scorpius and then Higgs yelling at him bright an early on Saturday to get up so they could go flying.

"No- no no I don't-" He did not want to go flying.

"You're never going to make the team with that attitude!"

"But I don't want to make the team!" He didn't like Quidditch! He didn't want to play that crazy scary sport at all!

England was no help at all no matter how much Feliciano kicked up a fuss and even dug out the permission slip Lovino had signed to let him go down into the wizard's village at the foot of the mountain. The third years all decided that Hogsmeade could wait for rainy days and bleak weather, because a sunny September afternoon meant having Scorpius tear apart the boy’s dorms with Higgs looking for Feliciano's broom before they grabbed him by the legs and pulled him straight out of bed.

"But Gloria and Margaret are going to-"

"Don't you dare." Scorpius' angry warning made Feliciano clam up about Hogsmeade, clearly understanding how if he suggested leaving his friends to go with the two girls instead he would be a world of hurt and trouble.

So, Feliciano had to drag his feet with England laughing and easily handling his old Nimbus broom over his shoulder. A bit of fruit and toast stolen from the great hall made up their measly breakfast as they walked across the green school grounds. Higgs and Scorpius ran straight ahead of them until they were half-way to the Quidditch pitch, then dropped the wrapped up broom and started attacking
He almost wished they'd break it.

"It's a Starduster!" Scorpius gasped, getting half the wrapping off the broom before he suddenly began handling the contraption like it was important.

"Gotta be a five hundred model at least! Look at the binding!" Higgs was right there with him, tugging at the knotted twine around the paper instead of just ripping it anymore.

Scorpius' Flashbolt was hovering idly nearby and Higgs' broom was resting on the ground. Eliza had her lower model Flashbolt as well, but kept it tucked behind her back and was ambling quietly beside Feliciano so she could work with England to keep him hedged in. He resented it a little bit, but there was nothing he could do.

The Starduster had silver fused into the wooden body of the broom, making it shine a little bit with feathers mixed in with the hard wooden bristles. It looked like an oversized paint-brush and Feliciano tried to ignore the foldable foot-stands mounted at the very back before the bristles, silver pedals like on a bicycle to give him somewhere to place his weight, there was even a flatter, wider portion of the broom's body to form a proper seat. It was a professional broom, and that just made Feliciano even more reluctant to get on it.

"Alright, Vargas, mount up." Scorpius was already on his and ready to kick off, Feliciano just stared at the unwrapped silver monster resting on the grass.

He did like to go fast...

"I'm in the duelling club, isn't that enough?"

"Up, Vargas!"

He held his hand over the broom and took a breath to summon it, only to have the Starduster leap off the ground and stick to his palm like a warm, tailored glove.

God damn it.

The thing was actually bound to him: Feliciano saw his name shimmer across the head of the broom with the silver words 'for someone who will go far' flare up before they vanished again. The Adams family had hexed the broom before sending it to him, it probably wouldn't carry anyone else now.

He was touched, but in an almost offended kind of way.

"A race to the Slytherin stands then?" Higgs suggested. "Too early for the teams to be out practicing, especially on a Hogsmeade Saturday!"

Feliciano would have rather been in Hogsmeade!

"Ready? Go!" Hey wait-!

Feliciano swung a leg over the broom and kicked off, ankles confused by the lack of support and knees wobbling looking for the body of a motorcycle or horse. He kicked his feet up and his heels immediately found the footstands at the base of the broom, his weight resting on the wide seat instead of the discomfort of a slim wooden rod against his crotch. He reached his short arms up the broom and couldn't quite get a grip in the right place, but it was good enough as he lowered his head and moved.
The grass slid away from him and the wind went straight into his eyes, forcing him to squint hard as he shot forward on a smoothly rising angle and caught up with Higgs before he expected to.

He saved energy by hovering behind Higgs instead of just passing him, finding the flute of air behind him to just coast right on his tail as the Quidditch pitch loomed. As soon as Higgs glanced back to look for him, Feliciano broke out of the wake and propelled himself ahead, feet pressing back against the metal bars as his body inched up the broom and he heard a yell through the wind racing past his ears.

The Slytherin stands were on the far side of the pitch from the direction they were approaching from, Scorpius about fifty yards ahead with hands grasping the head of his broom and forehead angled down so he could keep his gaze straight and avoid the wind buffeting against him. Fine, he wanted a race? Then they would race.

Tucking his elbows in tightly, Feliciano spared a quick look back at where England and Eliza were chasing the pack and then focused on what was in front of him. Locking his elbows, there was no motor to rev, just his own body naturally syncing with the broom so it gave a reactive hum and then picked up more speed.

He peeled off higher in to the air and twisted like a corkscrew to let the air jet past him, then took a deep breath to line up his sights with where he wanted to go.

He dove. Gravity and the magic of the broomstick worked together to propel him forward at a steep angle that brought the wind whistling past his cold ears and pressed his hair flat against his skull. His knuckles were frozen in the brisk air as the dive carried him down to half the height of the red Gryffindor tower and the proper Quidditch pitch opened up under them. He pulled himself straight and the Starduster reacted with a burst of silver energy out the back end that gave him a level line of sight screaming towards the green and white checkers for Slytherin.

A misplaced dash of gold zipped in front of him and vanished before he was half-way across the pitch and still lagging ten yards behind Scorpius who was above him. When Feliciano spun his broom again trying to build the momentum to shoot up for more height, he saw the gold flash again and let one hand fly free to grab it.

He caught the walnut-sized body of a golden snitch in his palm, hung on as tight as he could and cranked up on the front of his broom through the wind to shoot straight up this time. He bellied out into a wide arc, feeling himself slow down before he hit the height of the loop and momentum was a beast that flung him straight at the stands.

Scorpius touched the platform first and scuffed his feet over the tented awning spread over the top, but Feliciano was miles ahead of Higgs when a sudden hand reached out from under him and grabbed the handle of Feliciano’s boom, yanking it straight out from under him.

He was seventy feet in the air and flipped right over his own wrists, falling with his robe sweeping up over his head and air screaming through his fingers, legs kicking at nothing over his head.

"COME!" he screamed, losing the word in a terrified yell as his muscles all seized together and the imminent pain of impact came roaring up under him. His eyes were locked shut and everything was a blur of noise and cold wind, but then he heard a familiar ringing and his flailing arms struck the body of a broomstick.

He grabbed the Starduster, let go of the snitch, and used both hands to clutch the bonded broomstick close before his foot found one of the stands and the rod woke up and shot him forward instead of up
or down. He was flying blind until the wind blasted his robe back, daylight and green grass blurring before he dropped and hit the ground in a heap.

He could have been killed.

It hit him like the sand and turf that were kicked up when he landed without finding his feet, his body rolling twice before coming to a complete stop with Feliciano sitting upright, legs shaking and heart hammering. He was barely able to breathe around the wild panic flooding his veins alongside the adrenaline of the fast ride, but he could have been killed.

If he hadn’t known how to summon his broom back in mid-air and then been able to catch it, Feliciano would have been nothing but a mangled corpse at the base of Slytherin tower.

And Scorpius knew it too, because there was a terrible sound from up in the air before Feliciano spun around onto his knees and saw two broomsticks collide when Scorpius dove at and then directly tackled someone in red and gold Quidditch robes.

Someone was blowing a whistle and with a rush of air footsteps crashed next to Feliciano. Albus Potter was yelling loudly before the other third year had both hands on his shoulders, prying at his robes asking over and over again if he was alright.

“He didn’t mean it! James couldn’t have- I swear it!”

He slapped Albus’ hand off his arm and stood up, wand out and eyes trained up on the two young wizards grappling with each other in mid-air. Their brooms were circling and barely controlled by ankles and knees as James Potter got a fist full of Scorpius’ hair and the Slytherin fought back with a punch that glanced off Potter’s cheek instead of slamming him full in the face.

Feliciano had no idea how downright furious he was until he felt his wand starting to burn in his hand, the wood heating up so dramatically that it started hurting to hold onto. He refused to let it go, but rolled it quickly between his thumb and fingers trying to reign in his temper and not let something awful out of his mouth or into the air to stun Potter and see how well he handled a fall like that.

England nearly crashing right in front of him was the only other thing that stopped him from casting, forcing Feliciano’s line of sight to break and not even saying anything as he just stood there silently, breathing hard and flushed from the race with his pale hair sticking up everywhere.

His green eyes were saying the same thing as his slack pink lips and the way his hands kept almost rising only to fall back down under his robes. He was saying ‘Yes, I understand’, and ‘No, don’t you dare do anything’.

Feliciano nodded and holstered his wand again, still too angry to be afraid of his own anger. It was too raw, because that stunt had been too reckless.

“Enough!” A voice Feliciano hadn’t heard in a very long time yelled across the pitch. Gamp landed in a heap and threw her frightened arms around Feliciano in relief that he was okay, and the rest of them watched Professor Desford’s wand fly into action.

The First Year Flying instructor didn’t need her own broom to settle things, because when her whistle failed her wand released two silver cords that swung around the bristled ends of Scorpius and James’ brooms and yanked them both apart. James lost his seat because he didn’t let go of Scorpius right away, but he was skilled and strong enough to catch himself with one hand and bring himself to safety. Both boys were fished out of the air and their brooms shook them off once they were close to the ground.
“James Potter!” Professor Desford was as blonde and bright-eyed as Feliciano remembered from two years ago when he’d been in her class, but she was down-right furious in her black and white robes as she stormed across the pitch and caught both racing brooms in her hands to confiscate them. “In all my time at Hogwarts I have never seen such a disgraceful display! Twenty points from Gryffindor! And detention with me on Monday after lessons, do you understand? I should have you suspended from Gryffindor’s first match of the season!”

“He stole the snitch, Professor!” Potter argued, too old to whine like a child so he stood there with shoulders back, head up straight as he defended himself instead. “I was within my rights to get it back!”

“Not with illegal and uncalled for grab that almost killed Mister Vargas! One more word, Potter and that’ll be it for the season!” Feliciano had never seen someone shut James Potter up so fast, but it worked and he stood there bitter and unimpressed with his hands behind him, eyes watching his broom hungrily as the Professor gave no signs of giving it back. “And you, Mister Malfoy, should be equally ashamed!”

“Professor, he-” Scorpius had a cut on his lip and the mess along the side of his head showed where Potter had likely ripped hair free from his scalp, but Scorpius didn’t need telling twice to shut up and take the scolding from Desford.

“We all saw what he did, Mister Malfoy! But that does not give you the right to swoop in like an eagle and attack either! You should be more concerned with looking after your friend, not avenging him!” They all waited to hear her take away points equal or greater than what Potter had lost for Gryffindor, but the judgement never came because instead Professor Desford turned around and, with a threatening shake of her short blonde head, she turned on Feliciano next.

“That will be five points from Slytherin for interrupting Gryffindor try-outs this morning, Mister Vargas.” Feliciano just nodded, he didn’t trust himself to speak and was rewarded for that when Desford looked up and actually counted how many Slytherins had flown unannounced into the Quidditch pitch. One or two could be believed as a crash, but only one of them was actually on the Slytherin team and Higgs, Gamp and Kirkland had been so far behind him and Scorpius that… well, it spoke for itself.

“We were only out helpin’ Vargas practice with his new broom, Professor.” Higgs stole the words Feliciano was still too twisted up inside to try digging out and saying. “I’m sorry, I told them there’d be no one out this early on the pitch.”

“It’s quite alright, Mister Higgs. You may go back to your Saturday, but you will have to leave the pitch immediately.” They all understood and showed it with nods and murmurs, Scorpius getting a look that matched Potter’s now when it came to watching his broom in Desford’s gloved hands. “And these? I will gladly return them to your head of house, as soon as Professor Longbottom and Professor Malfoy are willing to come and collect them.”

The condition that had James Potter pulling a gross face and rolling his eyes a little once Desford’s back was turned also made Scorpius look like someone had just signed his death warrant. All Feliciano cared about, really, was just getting away from the pitch and the Gryffindor team before he wound up sending someone else along with Scorpius up to the hospital wing.

“Calm down,” England whispered, walking right next to him as the five of them turned and left the Quidditch pitch in a line.

“I’m trying,” Feliciano muttered back, leading that line all the way back down to the dungeons.
It took Scorpius about four hours before he mustered up the courage to crawl up to the infirmary and speak to Professor Malfoy about his broom. It could have taken much longer, but the stress of not having it just by his bed in the Slytherin dorm was obviously too much for the poor boy. He still needed Arthur and Charles to go up with him and wait outside, but he went in alone and was inside for about twenty minutes.

Arthur, admittedly, was growing a bit worried just standing out there in the corridor. Charles was staring absently out one of the windows near the bare patch of wall where two years ago a portrait had hung. His head felt too empty with the charm humming between his ears as usual, but Scorpius did finally make his return as the Hospital wing doors swung open soundlessly and he stepped out with a curiously blank look on his face.

"How'd it go?" Charles jumped on the question because the doors closed right behind Scorpius with Professor Malfoy nowhere to be found. "He didn't say no, did he?"

"No, nothing like that." A mild shrug from Slytherin's seeker and then he shoved both hands in his trouser pockets, looking down at the floor for a second and giving an awkward shrug. "It wasn't so bad, he said he'll go down to Desford's office after dinner." Then the issue was settled and Arthur was quite pleased.

"Didn't take any points for you getting in a scrap, did he?"

"According to him it was Desford's call, not his. Pain's punishment enough." Scorpius pointed up at his lip where there was still a swollen red mark at the corner of his mouth from James Potter's fist. "If I make a fuss about this then he'll take a pittance, maybe two or three, but I'm fine with it really."

"You just want something to show off to Gloria." Higgs teased, a sing-song rise in his voice as the three of them started walking and Scorpius looked disgusted.

"That nag? Never." They didn't quite know where they were going when they reached a staircase and Arthur started going up but Higgs turned down and Scorpius was left on the platform looking confused. Scorpius was the one to get them oriented with a smart question: "Where are Vargas and Gamp?"

"Up in the Owlery, you saw how upset she was after that crash." It had been a very near thing to get Arthur to leave Italy alone. He'd been outright furious for once and Arthur knew how dangerous that could be for any adult, nation or otherwise, but Italy especially. He wasn't prone to anger, and he wasn't the kind of person who was comfortable with or who knew how to handle it comfortably. South Italy could flare up with his temper and then calm right back down, but North wasn't like that.

The three of them turned up the stairs and started climbing past silent portraits and even crossed paths a few times with other students from different houses. The Hufflepuffs jumped, the Ravenclaws looked down their noses, and the Gryffindors were simply too offended to deal with them. Arthur rolled his eyes while Charles let it get under his skin and Scorpius just sighed and led them straight up to the double-doors and winding staircase of the Owlery's tower.

Owls were very smart creatures, sharper than some ministers in Arthur's government in fact, and loyal the way dogs were praised to be. The Owlery's wide windows kept the air circulated, heating charms in place for the coming winter and high perches with bins of food and water all over the place. About thirty feet of ceiling space with perches high and low, half-walls of stoops along with
cleaning charms embedded in the wooden floors and over every available space to keep any measure of filth gone before a speck of it could build up. It was a well-lit, cheerful space full of soft hoots and coos from the hundred or so stooped, snoozing owls.

Arthur and the others climbed into the Saturday sunlight in time to hear a round of happy applause and nearly got swept in the face with a wide white wing before a startled owl looped by them and fluttered urgently back to the widest part of the circular tower's floor. Arthur found himself grinning as the snowy creature extended its clawed feet out and comfortably took hold of Eliza's forearm, wings shifting as it folded and refolded them and the timid girl's hand reached out to stroke its feathers back in order.

It was more than just Eliza and Italy waiting for them, because right after she waved to them with her pet shuffling up to nuzzle and nip under her chin, two familiar voices started chirping questions.

"How much do you feed her? Mum says a cup of pellets a day at least but-"

"But dad says we should let 'em hunt for themselves the way they do here at Hogwarts so y'see-"

"Ours is a bit of a pudge because of it."

Italy was hopped up on one of the tables resting out with ink-wells, quills and parchments for drafting letters home. His ankles were crossed and hands on the wooden edge so he could lean forward and watch, nevermind wave and nod with an easy grin on his face as Scorpius and Higgs hustled forward to get a look at the speakers.

There was a bolt of dead silence when Charles Higgs came face to face with the Finnigan twins. The two second year Hufflepuffs were sitting on the floor and took a deep, simultaneous gasp each when they recognized each other from a hallway scuffle last year.

"Um-" And Eliza, who probably had no good reason to know what was going on, broke the silence with a quiet little peep and then looked back at the two Hufflepuffs and the trio of Ravenclaws who'd settled down to admire the display too. "Well, you should check the pellets they spit up in the cage. If Nully's as old as you say he is then he might not be catching enough mice around your house, so he needs the extra food. If he coughs up at least once a week then I think he should be okay, but- but you should really ask Professor Hagrid instead!"

Eliza's nervous little answer got the Finnigan twins, Ian and Finn, to break eye-contact with Charles, and that prompted the Slytherin to just relax a little and fold his arms, leaning on one of the sturdier wooden posts next to him as the brothers mulled over this suggestion and gave him an opening.

"Are you doing owl tricks then, Ellie?"

"Feli- Va-Vargas asked to see a couple!" Now now, she didn't have to stumble so hard just saying Italy's name but it was a quick look at the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws that explained why that was. She looked back at Italy where Arthur had wandered over next to the other nation, looking sorry for using his name like that around strangers.

Italy just laughed.

"I don't mind, Ellie! I like having friends say my name." Which included the underclassmen, who weren't all underclassmen as Arthur got a look over at the Ravenclaws. One of them was actually Addison Miller from their History class in third year, the other a first-year judging by her bright-eyed wonder, and a fifth-year Ravenclaw with a Prefect badge was watching from the corner where she had obviously forgotten to keep writing her letter.
"Are you gonna make Gus sing again?" Scorpius asked, still looking a little washed out and mellow from his visit to the infirmary. He'd taken up position on Italy's other side, leaning his weight on the same table before Arthur hopped up to sit on it.

"You can make one sing?" This was far too much for the first year girl sitting on the floor, because Miss Miller from third year asked the question like the idea confused her, the first year- who judging by her gold hair and the way she started grabbing and tugging on Miller's robe, must have been her sister- was bouncing on the floor like it was Christmas morning.

"Um- it's not really singing, but Gus does try." Arthur felt a rustle of feathers on the stoop next to him, which he assumed must have been Gus given how sensitive owls could be to the sounds of their names. When Eliza turned around to look at him instead of one of the owls, he was confused. "Is it alright with you, Arthur?"

"Is what alright with me?" He understood the painful expression she put on even less than the question itself!

"If... I ask Gus to perform?"

"Why would you have to ask? I don't know these owls."

Eliza Gamp looked like she was slowly collapsing under a weight, until Arthur realized it was more of a 'you can do it!' look she was giving him, silently begging for him to give an answer he simply didn't know.

"Gus is your owl," she pleaded.

"That's ridiculous." He answered, looking at Italy who was looking past Arthur all together and being no help, Scorpius was the same until Arthur turned to see what they were watching. "I haven't got a bloody-"

He saw bright yellow eyes, steel blue feathers, and then felt the sharp, splitting pain of a beak snapping on his nose. Arthur flung both hands up over his face with a wail and shut his eyes against the sting, understanding slapping him in the face before Scotland's steel blue monster of an owl took off from its perch and went growling over to Eliza to land on her other arm.

"You-!!" he bellowed, kicking his feet and falling back on the table while Italy and Scorpius howled at him with laughter.

"Well, of course he bit you, you hurt his feelings!" And then he got a scolding for it on top of everything else!

"He's not my bloody owl! He's my brother's!"

"You could at least learn his name! It's no wonder he's such a monster to you." Scorpius was laughing into his sleeve and Italy had given up completely, one arm on Scorpius's shoulder and head bowed so he could just laugh.

After everyone was settled down and Eliza tried to calm the expectations about Gus breaking into a full song and dance routine, the girl with the monster bird on her arm put her finger to her lips, made eye-contact with the blue featherduster, and counted down gently with a mouse between her fingers to court him into singing.

Scotland's owl twisted its head around, fluffed all of its feathers up like it was clearing it's throat, and with a ridiculous bob of its head it began.
It was a warbling, unsteady pitch deep in the animal's throat, but then it rose and fell again, catching a rhythm with the bob of Eliza's finger while her locked shoulder kept her other arm perfectly steady for the owl. Right before Arthur could interrupt and point out the tears the bird was putting in her robe, his ear caught what was trying to happen.

It was the school song, poorly rendered, but it got a wonderous grin on the little Ravenclaw's face and the Finnigan twins shared a look before one of them, Arthur didn't know which, whispered a line of the song in time with Gus's crooning.

The twins set off Higgs, who mumbled the next few words in a staggered beat to keep up with the owl, and then when the owl couldn't remember what came next and just started repeating itself, the upperclassmen who all knew the song followed it:

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, hoggy, warty Hogwarts! Teach us something please!"

That was all the owl could do and Eliza was beaming as she offered up the mouse and it was gobbled down whole, Scotland's owl getting an affectionate stroke on the head before it twisted its whole skull around for a proper scratch, a pleased croon warbling from its thick throat before it even head-butted her hand softly. Arthur refused to be jealous, but Eliza made an uncomfortable sound before trying to convince the owl to jump over to her other arm. It took a bit of coaxing but the animal finally did so, nipping her ear in a much *kinder* way than it had Arthur's bruised nose before huffing into the air and beating its wings to find its usual roost up near the ceiling.

Arthur joined in the fast, eager applause because whatever his issues with the bird, he was genuinely impressed with the tamer. Even the Ravenclaw Prefect was pleased as she summoned her own owl down to carry her letter off to whoever it was for, the other two girls from her house finding their feet.

The first-year girl started babbling hard at Eliza about owls being cute and adorable and so very smart, and Arthur was distracted from his misery by Italy prodding him to see if his nose was alright. He was in fact fine, the owl had bitten hard, but not pierced the skin. They looked back around in time to see the Finnigan Twins standing there, curly haired and bright eyed in front of Higgs, who was trying to say something with Scorpius there to back him up.

The nations scurried over and only caught the very end of it.

"So that's behind us, I won't be wasting my time with it."

"You call it a waste of time to go beatin' my brother up?" That one must have been Finn Finnigan then, the brother who was ever so slightly taller now. His thin lips were a little bit tighter than his brother’s, who was more interested in getting a look through the rafters trying to spot Gus again.

"I do. I'd rather take you lot out in the duelling club instead."

Ian Finnigan forgot about the owls and gasped instead, vibrating a little bit and dancing on his toes from excitement.

"We're in second year! We can join that now!"

"You want to? Then that means you'll be comin' to the first meeting in October then?"

"Where is it?"

"Creevey's classroom usually, but there's a duelling hall on the fifth floor too."
And just like that, whatever tension Arthur was afraid of lingering between Slytherins and Hufflepuffs evaporated in the wake of a mutual interest. Higgs was more focused on setting up more cannon-fodder for duelling matches than fussing about who was in which houses and the twins lapped it up.

The Ravenclaws left as a group and the Hufflepuffs had to go after that, leaving the Slytherins to applaud Eliza again and tease the poor girl for her success until they feared she might start to cry again.

“What about Scorpius’ broom though?” It was a pleasing way to wrap up a Hogsmeade Saturday that had otherwise gone awry that afternoon. Furthermore, it led to a wonderful surprise that Tuesday morning as the Slytherins rose bright and early and trudged down to Scorpius’ least favourite class with Hogwarts’ most colourful instructors.

Rubeus Hagrid was a half-giant, a bit of a drinker, and made absolutely no secret of his preferences, loyalties, and damned heavy heart of gold. The groundskeeper who was so slow to ask Slytherin students what they thought or felt about the lesson’s contents was bellied by the way he refused to so much as even pretend to antagonize any of them. He was ten feet of first-impressions, long, twisted dreadlocks of white hair merging seamlessly with his foot-long beard that muffled his words and hid his expressions so his massive gestures had to communicate instead.

His favourite students in the class of Ravenclaws and Slytherins were Addison Miller of Ravenclaw, and Eliza Gamp of Slytherin.

His least favourite student was Scorpius.

In fact, by the end of September Arthur was convinced Hagrid hated Scorpius.

But that Tuesday morning wasn’t about Scorpius being told in excess of seven times not to break eye-contact with the Gnome Queen he was teaching them how to diplomatically coax from the school’s vegetable garden. It was about what he called the Slytherins back for not five seconds after dismissing them for the day with only a few bit fingers and sore ankles to carry off to their joint History class with Huntington and the same group of Ravenclaws.

“Gamp! Miss Gamp! A moment please!”

Eliza, unsurprisingly at this point, froze on the wet grass and then burst into nervous tears at the sound of Professor Hagrid’s loud voice bellowing and booming behind them. Arthur was positioned just right to both hear what Gloria Flint said and then catch the ungentlemanly stare Scorpius shot at the back of her head. It fell to Charles to convince Ellie that she wasn’t in any great trouble and that they’d stand with her if she wanted them to.

Hagrid caught up to them in his long fall jacket, a mish-mash of animal pelts and tangled white hair as he pawed along his several dozen oversized pockets looking for something in particular. He was muttering to himself and them to ‘wait just a tick’ and ‘s’right here I swear t’is…’. The Slytherins looking at each other nervously while Ellie dried her tears up on the edge of her robe sleeve.

“Aha!” and with a proud declaration their Care of Magical Creatures instructor pulled a burlap sack holding something heavy inside from one of his pockets. The rank smell of old dirt and grass clippings made Arthur scrunch up his nose a little and stare curiously between the other students and the half-giant. Italy was mimicking him and looked like he wanted to take a step back, but the bag was presented to Eliza with some kind of explanation from the professor.

“Now, you lot know Albus Potter an’ Rose Weasley, don’t cha?” Hagrid asked, hands on his knees
so he could bend over and be more or less at eye level with the rest of them—minus Italy, who was at chin level with the giant. “Well I don’t fancy y’know their uncle Charlie Weasley—”

“Charlie?” Higgs piped up, only to get a look and a hushing hand from Hagrid.

“Aye, aye, same name- and good name too. Charles. Common enough, it is. There’s even an Arthur Weasley in the family too don’t cha know.” Arthur did know that, but he was more interested in what one of Rose’s uncles had to do with this. “Now, in his time at Hogwarts Charlie Weasley was one of the best at carin’ for all kinds ‘a creatures, big and small. Last I heard he was off in the Galapagos researchin’ sea serpents.”

“Oh,” Ellie broke in, “but Professor Hagrid I’m not—"

“Miss Eliza Gamp!” Professor Hagrid interrupted, causing the lot of them to jump a little and the four boys to close in around her where even Arthur felt a jolt watching the half-giant rise back to his full height. “I’ll have you know that the gnome queen here at Hogwarts has had her colony in our vegetable garden for nearly sixty years now.” He pronounced, then broke off with a curious drop of his brows under the tangled curls of his bangs.

“Sixty years? Wait…” two heavy hands with thick fingers rose and started counting, dispelling the illusion of strict authority as he lost count again at four and then dropped his hands with a heavy sigh. “It don’t matter! What matters, Miss Gamp, is you’re the first student in my twenty years-a teachin’ who’s been able to coax the queen to let up on the Halloween pumpkins. Didja get bit at all this morning, Miss Gamp?”

“N-No, sir…”

“First student in a long time who can say that too.” A glance at the others revealed a smile Scorpius was trying very hard to cover up and not show off behind Eliza, but Charles wasn’t bothering to hide the way he was starting to puff up. “Care to show me your forearms now, Miss Gamp?”

“My what?”

It took a little bit of blundering and huffing until Eliza agreed to roll up her robe sleeves and then unbutton the cuff around her wrist, but Professor Hagrid was already sighing and tisking sharply just plucking his heavy fingers at the black fabric.

“Now see, none of this will do at all.” He sighed, exasperated and a little sad even by the time Gamp got her sleeve half-way to her elbow and they all saw what Hagrid had been after. There were scratches and red marks all along the underside of her arm from owl claws, bruises where knobby feet had grabbed too tightly trying to keep balance. “I won’t keep you Slytherins much longer since I know ya got darling Miss Huntington next class, but Miss Gamp you take this from ol’ Charlie and we’ll see if that don’t make things better.”

They were dismissed after that and had to run as fast as they could with Eliza’s foul-smelling gift to reach Huntington’s class on time, but the five of them burst in and went straight to their seats right as the brass clock behind her stage started tolling. They found their seats and began pulling out their books without looking up, knowing they were in at least a little trouble and determined not to insult her by making a big show of it.

Instead of losing house points, they got a scolding look that almost felt like it hurt more. Because they hadn’t arrived in time, they weren’t offered anything off the small plate resting on the professor’s desk either. Arthur spotted cupcakes with fruit toppings on them part way through the lecture on Dragon hunting and decided missing out on the snack was a better way to curb tardiness
than taking it out on the whole house.

The only exceptional thing about History that morning was Arthur catching sight of Eliza Gamp at her desk with Addison Miller of Ravenclaw looking like she, maybe, had leaned over a little to have a chat over their writing assignment for the afternoon. Ellie wasn’t expected to sit out on her own during every lesson, but it was only fair that she sometimes got the short stick again now that they rotated the spare desk regularly.

Between lunch and potions there was just enough time to cart the smelly bag back down to the common room before they had to resign themselves to another Tuesday evening sitting abandoned and unhappy in the Divination room.

Arthur made sure to bring Scotland’s latest report with him as extra reading, but Italy’s owl from Rome had been delayed so he snuck a muggle pencil into his bag for some doodling before they all marched up to the seventh floor.

The divination room was on the seventh floor and then up a spiral wooden staircase that pulled out of the ceiling like an attic ladder. The ceiling was quite low, and instead of desks the floor had sunken pods filled with lavish pillows, branches growing out of the rafters and columns of a classroom whose ceiling, according to older students, could open up and reveal the sky. Falling asleep was not recommended, but in fact very common.

“If Professor Malfoy’s intervention didn’t do something then I’m completely at a loss.” Poor Miss Flint absolutely insisted on blaming Scorpius for everything to do with this class. The air was positively toxic between the Slytherins as they wandered inside to find the Hufflepuffs already settled into their seats and chatting about nothing special.

Italy had apparently either clued in about Flint’s attentions over the summer, or he remembered Arthur losing his temper at the last UN meeting about not flirting with the younger years, because he pushed Higgs in Flint’s way when she came at him saying there was space in her and Finnick’s little pod for another person, and the two nations quickly slid down into one of the padded booths together. Scorpius, Charles and Ellie quickly swept down into another one together, and the seating arrangements were finalized for the lesson.

Ten minutes after the start of class, with no instructor to be found, Arthur pulled out his report and began trying to read it silently in the dim light.

Ten minutes after that, he put the report away because the print was too small and he was too warm and comfortable to care about it. He slouched down on the cushions and gave a low sigh, shoulder to shoulder with Italy whose pencil was scratching softly at a foot of parchment he’d otherwise spilled ink on and couldn’t use for assignments and note-taking. When a thin spot in the pillow under his hips made the seat too hard, he just sighed and flipped over on his shoulder, explaining himself only when he heard Italy’s pencil stop rasping and then felt his arm nudge against Arthur a little bit.

“Oh, shut up, you’re warm.” He mumbled, getting a light chuckle back from his friend before just plain pushing his face down against Italy’s shoulder. “And you smell like almonds…” Italy’s answer was to move his pencil again, scuffing and scratching the paper, probably smudging it with his fingertips like he usually did when he was doodling and didn’t feel like being neat with his work.

However many minutes after that, with Arthur just dancing on the edge of sleep, they finally heard footsteps. He was nudged awake by Italy and what sounded like one of the Hufflepuffs hissing from the next pod for him to sit up, but it was the voice that really caught his attention:

“I will not teach the darkness how to untangle the light.” It was a deep, masculine voice with
something else to it that made Arthur bolt upright. The footsteps sounded like they belonged to more than one person until his mind blazed through too many other noises, landing squarely on memories of hoof-clacks and the rhythm of horses and- “I have made my quarrel clear to the Headmistress, who hides behind lies and misdirection. She would have this school bow to masked figures too cowardly to give their own names when addressed, but my brothers and I-

Centaur!

“-will not be dissuaded.”

Professor Firenze, if that’s whose thick curls masked with green rose up from a place unseen at the front of the chamber, was not a wizard in the classical sense or a human being of the most remote kind. The curled back stubs of ram horns protruding from the top of his head proclaimed age and wisdom that the rippled muscles of his bare chest and arms enforced. His tattooed skin bore star-bursts and ranking bands across his entire human half.

A siren went off between Arthur’s ears that he tried to immediately calm and quiet down as the animal half of the Professor’s body revealed itself with hooves of silver capping legs with strong muscles and bristled black fur. Professor Firenze’s hooves cracked against the chamber’s wooden floor and the leaves over Arthur and Italy’s heads curled up with a shy whisper, the two nations looking up and drawing quick glances from their classmates as well. There was a sense of alarm running through the children because Arthur could taste it: there was aggression coming off Professor Firenze in waves.

“Tell me your name.” The heavy, aggressive stomping of his hooves came to an end in front of Flint and Finnick, who were clutching each other’s hands and looked on the brink of tears from their mutual terror.

“G-” But Miss Flint was absolutely not to be out-done. “Gloria Flint, sir! Slytherin, I- from House Flint!” She reached beyond Hogwarts to find whatever information would satisfy the centaur, and it seemed to work because he turned pale blue eyes on Finnick next as she squeaked out her name in much the same way.

“Margaret Finnick of Slytherin! Daughter of-” She gave her mother’s name, surprisingly, not her father’s before Firenze strode away from their little pod of pillows on the floor and kept the same stately, fierce pace as he approached the next three Slytherins. His breaths were snorting loudly from his nose, like he was trying to catch the scent of something foul and didn’t know where it was coming from, only that it was in this chamber.

“E-Elizabeth Gamp of House Gamp, in Kent.” Ellie’s face should have been runny-nosed and terrified, but her eyes were wide open and she seemed more entranced than afraid as she spoke, and if it was courage then she passed some of that on to Scorpius, who went so far as to stand up.

He choked on a breath and broke eye-contact with the centaur, then held out a hand.


Professor Firenze didn’t shake his hand, but he did touch the offered palm with two calloused fingers as a way of acknowledging the gesture and allowing Scorpius to collapse bonelessly back down onto the lavender pillow that caught him. He was visibly shaking as Higgs tried to mimic him only to trip on his own robe before he could stand and flop over on his hands, mouth gaping trying to figure out what to do.

So Higgs did what Higgs always did. He clapped his hands on the floor to push himself up onto his
haunches, hands on his thighs like a drill instructor with his weight sliding to rest on his knees. He stared straight up, sucked a deep breath into his gut and:

“Charles Higgs of House Higgs, sir!” The centaur’s pointed ears flinched back at the noise he made and his lips twitched like he would bare his teeth, but then with a long draw in through the nose Arthur was almost sure he saw those blue eyes go very narrow before he turned away.

“I’m sorry-” He hissed under his breath, hand closed around Italy’s wrist as he heard a muffled “Why is there a-!” from the other nation and then it was too late: Firenze was over them.

And he was outraged.

“Lie.” Centaur’s were not meant to be aggressive animals, and so much asking around the school had made Firenze out to be one of the most gentle and laid-back of all instructors at Hogwarts. “Lie to me, spin your falsehoods and see if I can be fooled like the rest of them.” Just the way his tongue curled back like a viper behind his teeth, a glow coming off his eyes and power humming through the air along with all the aggression that felt like it was coming down to wall them off from the rest of their class.

Arthur had his feet under him and was ready to jump up and flee, but either Italy felt bolder or twice as afraid because his hands were frozen on parchment and books only half-put away in his lap. The shaking Arthur felt told him it was the latter though: Italy wasn’t getting ready to fight: he was trying to work up the energy he’d need to go flying from danger.

“We-”

“I-”

It didn’t matter what they were going to say because the Centaur knew- it knew what they were and Firenze let a deep roar out of his gut before rearing up on his hind-legs, Arthur heard himself scream before he and Italy were both scrambling back as fast as they could over pillows and the shelf of the classroom floor. The wild beast in front of them slammed both front hooves down so hard on the note-taking bench spread across the pod that it shattered where their legs had just been, and Arthur barely scrambled to grab his bag with one hand before he and Italy turned and took off running for the stairs and safety.

“Leaving! We’re leaving!”

“Leaving and we’re never coming back!”

“Don’t ever set foot in this classroom again!”

Firenze’s voice chased them down the empty hall from the divination staircase, something that didn’t even lower itself all the way before Arthur flung himself down and he heard Italy slam on the floor behind him. They went at a flat sprint and shot down the first flight of stairs they saw, terror making Arthur’s insides vibrate so the only way to function was to scream with Italy’s wails to match him.

No sense, no thought, no way to calm down or find a way not to be what everyone in this haunted, horrible place already thought them: children running in terror from a nightmare of a teacher.

Arthur only stopped running because Italy broke away ahead of him and Arthur slammed into someone who turned a corner right in front of him. It didn’t knock him back, but he spun with the collision and skidded to his knees and then his hands before letting himself collapse on the marble floor, heart slamming in his ears and gagging up his throat so he could barely breathe. But he could hear.
“What- what on earth!? Mister Kirkland- Mister Vargas!” Headmistress McGonagall’s shrill voice called after Italy but it was no good, he was long gone, and just that thought made Arthur do something mad: he started to laugh.

“You…!” And he rolled straight onto his back, flopping a little bit on the floor because he was shaking still and baffled by his own terror now that he wasn’t running away from it anymore. He saw Headmistress McGonagall standing there looking wide-eyed and completely stupefied by him. Professor Huntington, of all the kind and good-natured people, was holding the Headmistress’s frail arm where she must have stumbled after being ran into by him. “You- you batty old witch!”

Oh, he was going to get detention for that.

“Arthur!” Professor Huntington shrieked.

“Mister Kirkland what on earth-?”

“You have centaur for a teacher!” He was laughing too hard to care about detention, because when his declaration didn’t clear anything up for her Arthur just howled behind his hands and kicked his feet on the floor where he was still laying there on his back. Was he crying a little bit? Yes, those felt like humiliated, flabbergasted tears.

“Vargas and I are quitting Divination.” He spoke the words with a feeble ounce of self-respect before feeling himself give another snort and giggle sharply under his breath. He tried sitting up and sort of made it.

“You can’t drop a class you’ve only just started!” Thank you, Miss Huntington but:

“Well I just did.” Arthur opened his hands like shutters on a window and smiled up at the very first irate expression he’d ever seen on Professor Huntington’s otherwise jovial face. “And I don’t give a hoot about the double detention I am never setting foot in that classroom again.”

“Professor Huntington,” Headmistress McGonagall might not have been clueing in, but when a Nation’s physical manifestation disguised as a child proclaimed for itself and another National Persona that it was never, ever, ever in a million years going to go back to a class at her school, she seemed to understand the weight of the decision. The Headmistress reversed her hold on the younger Professor, turning it into a mothering clasp of her hand and a gentle pat on her wrist. “Alice, why don’t you go and track down Mister Vargas while I handle Mister Kirkland? At the speed he was going I’d wager he’s half-way to London by now.” And then she flashed the sort of smile that would put any Grandmother to shame.

“Of course, Headmistress.”

“If he proves troublesome then simply pop in on Professor Malfoy for help, he should be instructing the Advanced Potions classes down in the dungeon this afternoon.”

Professor Huntington sped away with an awkward look back but a very clear sense of understanding, and once the coast was clear the witch and the nation shared a funny moment of silence. He let McGonagall break it first.

“How do you like Miss Huntington as an instructor, Mister Kirkland?”

“I think she’s quite lovely, really.” Arthur sniffed hard and then used no magic at all to shake a Slytherin hanky from his pocket, wiping off the tears and sweat from his screaming before deciding that no, he didn’t want to stand up just yet.
“I’m pleased you think so.”

“That’s who I’ll be serving detention with, then?”

“Oh, Mister Kirkland,” such a dame, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall, a sorceress with the strict control to give Arthur a doting smile that told him exactly how sick she was of having him in her school. “Detention indeed.”

And then with a crook of two fingers, Arthur Kirkland was summoned to his feet and followed his Headmistress diligently up to her office.
What Does the Howler Say?

By the end of that week Feliciano and England were officially excused from all Divination Lessons, but that didn’t stop the details from going into Feliciano’s little book. There wasn’t much the two of them could say to their classmates about the change either. On the one hand students like Charles and David Baker from Hufflepuff understood without question that being stampeded by a centaur was all the reason someone needed to drop a class. On the other, Scorpius and Ellie were still concerned but too terrified of receiving the same treatment to ask Firenze. Ultimately it was Scorpius who put his foot down and refused, on Italy and Arthur’s behalf, to let Flint march her fussy little way back up to the Infirmary and bother Professor Malfoy.

Flint and Scorpius simply weren’t on speaking terms for the rest of October.

Aside from their new classes where Ellie excelled with creatures and there was all that excitement with fortune-telling, nothing had really changed from the end of second year through the first month of third.

Feliciano avoided Slytherin’s Quidditch try-outs for the new year to replace Thomas Higgs and several other players by going around and cataloguing the remaining paintings in the school. He found it harder than ever to get them to speak to him. There were also so many other missing portraits this year that, even if he couldn’t remember what they’d looked like because he hadn’t paid attention before, he knew they were missing because of the gaps on the walls.

Halloween, for all its glowing candles and impressive extra-large pumpkins this year (which were thanks to Ellie, and all of Slytherin made sure to voice their appreciation!), was extremely quiet for the ghosts. Nearly Headless Nick nearly didn’t make an appearance, and the Fat Friar hovered very quietly high above the tables without deigning to come down for more than a few minutes at a time.

Other smaller, lesser known ghosts did come around however, including one surprise visit that almost made Feliciano shriek like a little girl when he agreed to one last piece of pumpkin pie.

“Such a sad little table you lot are.” The slice of pie was lifted up over a barely-there face embedded in the plate and Feliciano made a noise that was not a shriek before Scorpius burst out laughing at him. The face pushed its way up through the plate and was followed by two limp pig-tails and a collared white shirt with a colourless tie, a Hogwarts school vest and set of robes with a familiar cut all forming along with the scratched-up face of a house badge that Feliciano couldn’t read. “Another Ghostless Halloween for Slytherin. Such a pity, the Baron always was so unbearable at this time of year.”

“It’s not ghostless if you’re here, Myrtle!” Charles laughed, snatching floating chocolates out of the air as they zipped around the bag his brother had sent for the third years to share. The treats were shaped like a Quidditch set: seven tiny caramel broomsticks, a chocolate-covered cherry quaffle, two almond bludgers, and a small golden macadamia nut that Scorpius had already swiped and eaten as soon as it flew out of the package.

“You’re only saying that because I’m DEAD!” So this was Moaning Myrtle, the ghost that had terrified Feliciano last year after an awful run in with James Potter outside Gryffindor tower. He hadn’t actually seen her face, but the way her deflated cheeks hollowed out and her jaw dropped to show the great black void inside of her as she wailed the words sent a chill down his spine just the same.

“But you can still sit with us, Myrtle!” Ellie stood up at the table and accidentally took a bludger
almond in the cheek, a smear of chocolate left on her skin as she grabbed the treat hard in one fist and gave Higgs such a look that he almost crawled under the table. “It’s Halloween! I bet you’ve seen some wonderful Hogwarts pranks over the years, haven’t you?”

“That’s Peeves you should ask,” the ghost sulked, hovering there in the middle of the table. “But he’s gone forever- just like the Baron! It’s just as expected too, someone goes around killing Ghosts and forgets all about me! No sense hunting down stupid ugly Myrtle, she’ll just cry in her toilet all day, no sense wasting time putting an end to her afterlife!”

Feliciano choked on the pumpkin juice he’d tried drinking while listening to the ghost, meaning England beat him to the punch when they all heard what she said but only the nations seemed to understand it.

“Hold on, Myrtle,” He interrupted, earning a snuffling glare from Moaning Myrtle as she stared at his outstretched hand like it offended her. “Are you saying someone’s hunting the ghosts?”

“Well it’s plain obvious, isn’t it!?” She howled, too angry to run away and waving her arms so Feliciano felt a chill across his face. “Everybody’s talking about it, especially if you’re dead! The Grey Lady thinks she’s so wonderful because she escaped, but I tell you this: she isn’t wearing that veil over her face because she’s sad! She never cared a wit for the Baron, she’s a liar; and I hate liars!!”

The closest thing they had to a lead was incredibly hard to act on, because the Grey Lady not only refused to make more than a few brief, fleeting appearances all evening, but Felicaino had never actually seen her before except on Halloween.

He spent the first week of November trying harder than ever to make any of the Ravenclaw students in their combined classes talk to him. They had no room for it in History where they were expected to listen to Professor Huntington speak and then work in absolute silence from their textbooks for the remainder of the class. In Transfiguration where Feliciano excelled, Professor Parkinson had changed their seating arrangements and had him placed at the front of the class directly in front of her. This made it easier to earn points for excellent work in her class, but it was impossible to speak to the Ravenclaws without getting one of them in trouble for 'distracting' him.

His best bet was looking like he'd have to go through Ellie, who spent the majority of every Care of Magical Creatures class hovering somewhere around Addison Miller. The Miller girl didn't want much to do with the Slytherins at first- they hadn't made friends over the previous two years so why start now?

But Feliciano still wanted to try, just like he wanted to keep encouraging Eliza to take the class seriously and not let the same people who laughed about his History mark get under her skin about how much the Clabberts liked her or the noises the Blast-ended Skrewts made when it was her turn to feed them.

He wanted to focus on those things, but something else got in his way before he could.

Except it was more like the something else just wouldn't come.

"It's been two months and I haven't heard a single thing from you!" At first it had been nice enjoying Saturday mornings in the great hall without getting screamed at by Lovino's voice, but as November kept slipping by Feliciano was more worried than he wanted to admit. He didn't mind staying up a little later in the owlery on a Friday night after Astronomy to pen what had to be at least his fourth unanswered letter back to Rome, but with his wand out and tracing several patterns over the paper before he touched the quill to the smooth surface, he was going to make sure South Italy got this one
and knew to answer him.

"It's alright if everything's okay, but at least send me a message saying it's okay! Tell me what the weather's like, let me know how the world cup preparations are going! What about the election you said should be coming up soon? You have to tell me something!"

So, he repaid Lovino for two years of embarrassed looks in the great hall, and sent a Howler to Rome instead.

"Vargas, is that a shield charm you just cast on yourself?" Scorpius was the first one to notice the precautions from Feliciano that Saturday. He knew it was too soon for the owl he'd sent off to make it all the way to Rome with the delivery, but he figured there was no time like the present to brush up on his defensive magic!

"Mhmm! Physical and Mystic protection! What do you think?"

Scorpius finished off the pumpkin juice in his breakfast goblet, holding a finger up to show he had an answer and just needed to swallow, then whipped his arm back and threw the silver cup straight at Felicaino's face across the table.

There was the indescribable sound of sheet-metal warping and then bouncing back into shape before the cup was sent back across the table and struck the wooden surface with a clatter, tumbling end over end until Scorpius snatched it back up with a laugh and then checked the rim of the goblet to make sure it wasn't damaged.

"You gonna wear that to duelling club tomorrow?" Saturdays were Hogsmeade days and Sunday was when clubs and Quidditch practices took place, at least in Slytherin, and Feliciano just shook his head no while taking a bite out of the apple he split into slices with his wand.

"That wouldn't be very fair! This is just practice in case-"

A loud screeching cut Feliciano off and silenced the chatter in the hall with its alien voice, eyes going up towards the happy white clouds of the hall's enchanted ceiling as the usual Saturday post was beaten by the sharp beat of black wings hammering the air far head of the usual drowsy, lulling flock of owls.

"Uh oh..." It wasn't an owl that was scanning the rows of tables and then honed in on the Slytherins with their breakfast. It was white-breasted black bird with a long black beak that swept and dove several times with smoke trailing from its claws like an angry, vicious comet.

"Vargas, what did you do?" England hissed at him and Feliciano found himself reaching out for the student sitting next to him- a fourth year who just twisted around curiously as Feliciano tried to figure out if he was going to get up and run or dive under the table and crawl away.

"That's not possible-" Oh God was that another one? "I sent it last night! There's no way it could have reached Rome or he could answer me-!" Unless the two smoking letters with black bird carriers had already been on their way when he-

The third-years clued in.

The entire table clued in.

"Vargas, run!"

"What did you send him-?"
"A howler-"

"YOU SENT THE HOWLER A HOWLER!?"

"Run and don't stop!"

"Call your broom now: it's your only chance!"

He did, to his credit, try to run. Feliciano bolted from the table and made it about half-way to the chamber doors before one of the crows circling overhead cawed again and then dropped the first howler right over him, and Lovino must have installed a very short fuse because it exploded with a sudden bang while still in mid-air.

A small thunderbolt cracked the stone floor right in front of him and Feliciano's feet slipped, sending him to the floor with one hand catching him hard on the stones. The smoke from the blast immediately took on a solid presence that distinctly mirrored his brother in size and form, chasing him back several paces as it lunged forward with wide, powerful steps and South Italy's voice raised to the rafters in archaic Latin:

"You pig-fucking doormat!" It was almost as terrifying as the real thing. "I'm on vacation you self-entitled shit-stain!" His words had to be archaic and it had to be a brand of Vulgar Latin that only himself and Grandpa Rome would have remembered, because Lovino had to keep his voice out of modern- "Va-ca-ition! Something you're so fucking smothered with having your precious weekends and field trips and clubs and worthless shit! Whereas I have to deal with Darling Presidente la SHIT-EATER who I won't even get into because MY carbon-crusted lungs aren't worth half a goat to the entire damned assembly! FURTHERMORE."

The smoke fell apart and the faceless, featureless form of his brother lost its voice to the stunned silence of the school. Feliciano could feel his heart slamming his throat and a dark flush creeping up his face, but took a deep breath to try and calm down, dragging one leg back under himself so he could sta-

BANG!

Right, there were two:

"FURTHERMORE!" The shade burst back to life, "I've spent half my God-damned vacation refurbishing that SAINTS CURSED LOT in piss-water Venezia of all disgusting places! And before you bother asking: NO! I DON'T CARE IF FIRENZE IS THE CENTRE OF WIZARDING ITALY! I WOULD RATHER CASTRATE MYSELF AND THROW THE POPE IN THE STRAIGHT OF MESSINA THAN CRAWL BACK INTO THAT DEVIL'S COLON OF A HOUSE."

"SO I'M DOING FINE, THANK YOU FOR ASKING." Now you see he was starting to sound calmer and even spilled into standard Italian, but Feliciano kept his arms up over his head and face down against the cold stone floor just the same. "BUT NEXT TIME-" See? "DON'T YOU DARE-" Oh god- "PULL A STUNT LIKE THAT AGAIN, ESPECIALLY WHEN I'M IN A FUCKING SICILIAN PUBLIC MARKET!!"

The second Howler disintegrated, a tiny puff of blue smoke from its core dropping something with real weight and substance to it that clattered hard on the floor in the shape of a rectangular package wrapped in brown paper and twine. Feliciano barely lifted his head to get a look at it. The sound of two crows cawing to each other like laughter as they flew out of the hall and away from the school.
was the only noise for several tense, mortifying seconds.

But when he did look up, he saw the whole of Ravenclaw table just staring at him. The Slytherin Prefects looked too stunned to move and drag him up and off the floor, and the first human noises to try and brush over the silence came from Gryffindors who started whispering before the Hufflepuffs did the same thing. Howler, Howler: he was going to be hearing about this for weeks.

Howlers at Slytherin table were something most of the school was used to, he’d been getting them bi-weekly for two solid years and only the first years had been spared the treatment before. But Lovino had never sent two and Feliciano had never let one burst.

When he finally heard footsteps was when he was carefully getting up to his feet, holding the elbow of the arm that had caught him and flexing his fingers and wrist making sure he hadn’t accidentally hurt this fragile body by falling like that. He was fine until he looked up at Professor Huntington’s face.

Professor Alice Huntington’s pure white, absolutely livid face.

“Professore- gah!” Feliciano tried to speak but her wand twitched, and an unseen force grabbed him by the scruff. It hoisted the nation to his feet and he was too stunned to fight it off. The professor’s wand went straight up under his chin and Feliciano didn’t recognize who this person was anymore.

“You follow, and don’t speak.” She turned away and started walking, but Feliciano felt his ears ringing.

She-? She spoke- Latin? Actual Honest-to-God Latin?

He followed, too baffled to argue. She still had her want clutched tightly as she stormed away and he didn’t know what he could say anyways. He cast an unsteady look back at Slytherin Table- and was yanked back around by her spell.

“-!?” He’d never, not in two whole years, been touched by a staff member, nevermind manipulated by her magic-!

“Where are we-?” He used English. She was only a few strides ahead of him and already marching up a wide stairway higher into the castle.

“That will be five points from Slytherin for not following simple instructions, Mister Vargas.” He stared after her, aghast. The venom she injected into his name was uncalled for- and where was she taking him?

He followed. Feliciano was an adult and a nation. There was no way for her to harm him- but she didn’t know that. To her, he was only some thirteen-year-old child. He did not want to follow her, but he came anyways.

Thankfully, after a stifling and indirect march, her destination was the white double doors of the infirmary.

“Professor Malfoy!”

There was the far away and sorry sound of crunching toast. An uneasy squeak from a ferret made Feliciano look down where Professor Malfoy’s familiar Bella was standing by his ankle. She had her tiny white paws on his calf, her dark eyes actually carrying as much confusion as he was honestly feeling.
Professor Malfoy himself was sitting stunned at the desk at the back of the infirmary before his office door. There was a half-eaten breakfast and cup of tea at his elbow, a stack of what were probably students’ potions essays in front of him. He had a red quill in one hand and a corner piece of toast in the other, the same purple jam on the bread staining the corner of his mouth.

The Nation, the Doctor, and the Ferret all shared a brief look but none of them came away from it with any answers. Professor Huntington looked like she was getting ready to burst and was huffing irritably where she was standing between Feliciano and the door, so it was up to Professor Malfoy to get it together and help him.

“Professor Huntington,” And Scorpius’ father did deliver, putting his food and work away and standing up. He quickly took a gulp of tea from his cup to wash away the sweetness of the toast and with the appearance of a white square of cloth, he cleaned away the trace of jam. He came out from behind the desk without appearing unduly anxious or confused. “Is there something I can help you with? Is Mister Vargas injured?”

“Yes, Saturday isn’t it? And just past nine so the post must have come not long ago: a howler, Mister Vargas?”

“Two, sir.”

“Two?” Professor Malfoy just smiled a little bit and Feliciano was beginning to feel the honest sting of fear in his system from the tension behind him in Huntington. “A late response to your Quidditch escapades with James Potter? And here I thought he’d taken to writing normal letters to you.”

Feliciano took a breath, shifted his weight, and told the truth along with waiting for whatever was going on to boil over. Professor Huntington had told him she spoke Italian because she’d gone abroad for work and study in his territory, but he’d never expected her to pick up such an old dialect along the way.

“Err, actually Professor: I haven’t heard from him since I left to stay at Kirkland’s house before the express. So, you see: I was getting a little worried and- ah, last night after Astronomy I sent him something.”

“It must have moved very quickly if he not only received it but his reply made it in this morning.” There was a knowing glint to his smile now and Feliciano wished he wasn’t so uncomfortable being led along by the nose to make an admission. “Did you send your bother a howler, Mister Vargas?”

“Only a little one!” He insisted, detention looming in front of him and not what he wanted from his Saturday at all! “Half the volume of his normal ones, I swear!”

“And I assume his reply was something to the effect of ‘never again’?”

“Yes, it-”

“It was a great deal more than that!” Feliciano’s alarm resonated with the terse, thin-lipped look from Malfoy for his peer. “The cruelty and vulgarity that only such a vile clan could come up with- and then expose to the entire school-!”
“Professor *Huntington*…” Malfoy’s reprimanding tone went unappreciated.

“That’s my family.” Feliciano spoke with no regard for his shrunken form. “I’m not going to listen to this.”

She turned her white-lipped fury on him again.

“And I refuse to tolerate that obstinence!” Obsti-? “This is not Italy, this is not your home, and you will not speak back like a spoiled prince!” Feliciano blinked and opened both eyes wide with exaggerated shock. How *dare* she-

“Professor *Huntington*!” And in front of his Head of House too. Feliciano had never heard Professor Malfoy’s voice rise like that before. “Mister Vargas, this will mean five points from Slytherin for antagonizing your brother, with whom I had previously struck an accord. No more howlers: you are dismissed.”

“You can’t let him go with only-” Malfoy wasn’t having any of this drama in his hall.

“I can, I shall, and I just did.” He told her sharply, then saw- “Off with you, go!” Feliciano, who habitually snapped a salute.

“Yessir!” And departed immediately. The last place he wanted to be was here.

The only thing he caught before escaping was a furious whisper from the witch that Malfoy rumbled over with a stern “*Into my office, please.*”

He escaped.

He was angry, but he escaped.

Arthur fulfilled his best friend obligations to Italy by snatching up the parcel dropped in the wake of his brother’s final howler. He’d acted before Huntington had realized that there was anything worth doubling back to the great hall for, and then run it down to the dungeons as fast as his thirteen-year-old legs could carry him.

The others had only followed Arthur out of the intense need to do absolutely anything in the wake of Italy’s removal. None of them had ever seen Huntington so much as frown during lessons, so the suffocating rage that had spilled off the witch had rightly shocked the children. Watching Italy be forcibly dragged away had not helped matters either: wasn’t the humiliating rain of howlers punishment enough?

So, the third-year Slytherin class retreated to the safety of their house. They all, minus Arthur, fretted over their friend’s absence and worried themselves raw waiting for his safe return. Arthur himself wasn’t nearly as worried, Huntington’s change in attitude had been a shock, but so had the exploding howlers, and he doubted she’d done much worse than perhaps scold him. He’d be *fine*.

The wait wasn’t so terrible. But upon his return to the house, Italy’s mood certainly was. A half-hour after his unceremonious exit, he was returned to them with his jaw tightly locked, his attention and patience badly frayed. Not even a new set of paint-brushes (without paint, mind you) from his brother could settle him down. He’d never behaved this way from a regular scolding.

“It wasn’t good.” Italy was holding tightly to his composure, more for the childrens’ benefit than
Arthur’s, he was sure. “I don’t like her, and I don’t want to talk about it.” Arthur chose to hear the silent ‘yet’ at the end of that statement and pushed no further. For now.

He caught Italy scribbling furiously into his black book of notes that night. This was not a good sign, but there was no way to really talk about it in front of the boys.

“She knows something?” He confided the next day while the two of them were up in the owlery. Italy had a mundane letter prepared for his brother this time. “Or at least she thinks she knows something. I just don’t know what.” But she had quite the chip on her shoulder.

“At least we know we can count on Malfoy to do his job correctly.”

Arthur approved very much with how Malfoy had handled the situation, but that didn’t stop him from penning his own curious letter to Scotland. A search would likely expose little to nothing at all about her, but Arthur would not be caught flat-footed about such things with Hogwarts’ reputation on the line. Still, he trusted McGonagall to vet her applicants properly.

After that, everything seemed to go back to normal at school. They all attended and performed as expected at all of their lessons on Monday. Care of Magical creatures was cut short once the water wisps escaped in the middle of a rainy meadow- but it was no big loss, really. Eliza still had hers, and earned herself ten glittering points for it.

The two nations arrived at History of Magic with the rest of their class, and it honestly felt to Arthur that they were ready to move past the weekend’s blunder. Regrettably, their instructor did not agree.

Out of all the Wixen folk who Italy could have picked for an enemy, and in a school brimming with feisty Gryffindors who would have relished the opportunity, Professor Alice Huntington was certainly the daftest choice. The worst part of it was how little Italy even had to do with it.

“Mister Vargas, can you list three reasons why the execution of Goliath Gargle in the 8th century was so devastating for the Welsh Wizarding Association in the early decades of the 9th?”

Italy was flabbergasted and Arthur only raised his hand because he knew the name and didn’t have to go scrambling the way Flint did through their textbook trying to find it. Huntington ignored him.

She let the class hang in silence for well over a stifling minute, only releasing Vargas from her stare when Arthur gave up and lowered his hand.

“Then can you recall what we discussed last class on the nature of Northumbrian Sorcery Policies in the same time period?”

Arthur barely remembered those policies because he and Scotland had worked together to repeal them, so he had no idea what kind of off-hand comment Huntington could have made about them in this class. His hand went up, Flint was scrambling madly through her class notes looking for the answer, and a quick glance at the Ravenclaws showed Addison Miller and one of her friends staring straight through their desks with baffled expressions all around.

“So much for review then.” Arthur didn’t like the new atmosphere in the History classroom, and he desperately wished Italy had sat next to him instead so they could at least whisper about it under their breath. “Everyone please, turn your attention to the map.”

Professor Huntington’s wall mural, beyond its lovingly crafted animations of cloud and ocean, was able to zoom in and pane over intricately detailed landscapes much like a satellite program in a muggle classroom. She directed it with her wand tip to focus on Europe and then zoom in down on
the Italian Peninsula. A painted calendar on the corner spun back further and further as the borders inked across the territory began to blend and fade and squirm around each other.

Arthur had to admit he was as intrigued as Italy must have been by the change in focus, and when the wheels stopped spinning and the borders settled into unfamiliar forms of the 9th century Italian city-states, Arthur got the cold feeling that his and Italy’s skills in History were about to reverse themselves.

“Before we can properly discuss the effects of contraband wand materials and techniques, it’s imperative that we understand where most of those materials were entering Europe from. Two major sources of mystic contraband were Scandinavia by way of northern expeditions across the north pole into Siberia, and along the far more lucrative muggle trading routes of the near east and Italy.”

She structured her introduction to the unit the same way she had every other one. The map showed them the cities and territories they needed to make note of, then came a list of Wizards and their families who would be coming up throughout the next months’ worth of lectures. There was another uncomfortable twinge through the classroom when the enchanted piece of chalk Professor Huntington was using to list the names suddenly stopped in mid-air and the professor turned an eye back on the assembled students.

“And, finally…” Arthur just wanted to put his quill and his head down on the desk, because he was coming ever closer to sending a letter off to Alfred with concise demands to know why exactly Miss Huntington had felt the need to leave her homeland. “You have the Vargas Clan, with its various family branches in Milan, Turin, Florence, Venice, Rome, Naples, and the Islands of Sicily and Sardinia, not to mention smaller homesteads in Bologna, San Marino, Seborga, and across the Papal States highlighted in blue.”

There was a quiet sense of wonder before attention swung around positively on Italy this time, the size of the Vargas name and their upgrade from Family to Clan not lost on any of the children. Italy didn’t squirm or try to deny it either, and if Professor Huntington was trying to antagonize Italy further with her next comment, she failed and it actually wound up being an almost amicable exchange.

“Were you aware of your family’s extent, Mister Vargas?”

“Si, Professore.” Oh, Arthur didn’t like the narrow little look Professor Huntington gave him over her smile for answering in Italian. But again, this exchange was civil. “Nowadays most of these branches are dead, but it will be nice to hear about them, I think.”

“Can you name all of the surviving Vargas Branches?”

“Of course.” The brief silence that hung between them was clearly a sign for him to do so, and Huntington raised both eyebrows with an expectant look on her face. Arthur didn’t know if she expected Vargas to fail or if she was hoping he could live up to the expectation. Arthur himself wasn’t worried. “The two main branches are Venezia and Napoli, which have a combined household in Roma. We have a few minor cousins in San Marino, Vaticano and Seborga, but Roma is where everyone does their business.”

“I think you mean Rome. The main branches are Venice, Naples, and Rome.” She honestly corrected him for using the Latin names instead of the English versions, and Arthur swallowed hard trying to get the second hand embarrassment out of his throat where it was choking him. Italy didn’t comment at all, but his quill did scratch something out on the page and re-write a few words where he was sitting a row ahead of Arthur.
“Class, I speak from experience when I say that it is extremely difficult to make any kind of progress with the study of Wizarding Italy without encountering Mr. Vargas’ family in some way, shape, or form. But in order to understand the decisions of the British Wizarding community during the 9th and 10th centuries, we must look at where the vast majority of the European Dark Arts found their beginnings.” Hold on…

Arthur had been trying to look down at his notes where the list of names over Vargas’ was… not exactly familiar, but the fact that at least a few of them felt like perhaps he’d heard or said them before… But he would have felt the same way about any set of inventors or great thinkers. He looked up when heard a piece of chalk- and not the usual pale blue or soft yellow of Huntington’s lectures, but rather a very ugly, livid green- rose up and scratched itself in a jagged way around the list of names. The name Vargas was written half an inch taller than any of the others as well.

“These are the names of the seven most powerful black magic families in Italian history, all of whom were active throughout the time period we have been discussing. You will do well to remember them for the rest of this unit.”

For whatever reason, Arthur expected Italy to get upset when he heard this. And perhaps Vargas did tense up and sit a little bit straighter, and there was a good chance that the grip on his quill became enough to snap it in two if he moved too harshly, but the fact remained that Italy didn’t give a proper outward reaction. From the moment Huntington as good as tried to stick a target on his back in front of their classmates, Feliciano was silent and studious over his textbook and the assignment Huntington placed on the board before proceeding with the remainder of her lecture. He was absolutely cordial and polite about it as well, and once they were dismissed he packed up his things and turned around with an amicable smile on his face for Arthur, stepping over to come up beside him so he could set a hand on Arthur’s arm, smile next to his face, and hiss:

“This weekend I’m going to Hogsmeade, and I’m going to take this thing off.”

Arthur did not argue.

Feliciano had made a promise to his brother at the end of second year that he intended to keep, not just because he wanted to keep his word, but because he understood and respected the reason why Lovino had made him swear to take the charm off.

It was one thing to be cut off from home. It was another to wake up feeling completely alone with another nation and two boys sleeping in the same chamber. He was physically removed from his people, isolated from his language, out of touch with his media, and unaware of his government and its actions. It was lonely.

England’s presence made it easier because there was comfort in knowing that someone else knew what he was going through. England didn’t get it as badly, they’d discussed it over summer and probably would again this coming Christmas, so Feliciano already understood that everything he felt on this mission England only suffered half of. Scottish children still spoke English. English children were still English.

British history, British culture, British society, British food, British art.

Because the Italian art, Feliciano finally discovered, had all been moved to one corridor up on the fifth floor by the duelling hall. The passage where the remaining portraits- those by Italian painters and those depicting Italian scenes, was patrolled day and night by two living suits of armor. He was
happy for the additional protection and he approved of the school’s methods, but that didn’t stop him from beginning to feel even more lost and out of touch when he couldn’t even hope for grape vines or roman columns on the walls as he followed his classmates to lessons. He was surrounded by Scottish moors and Welsh glades and Irish forests along the rolling English countryside. The architecture of the school was Germanic and the faux-Latin of English magical instruction just…

Scorpius’ match against Gryffindor was coming up fast on Sunday, so that Saturday Feliciano used the extra Quidditch obligations to leave as many friends behind as he could. He had to get into Hogsmeade and find anywhere that he could be alone for an hour, no more than two, and take the charm off.

If Feliciano couldn’t put his mind back in the context of being Italy, then he was going to lose himself completely to a temper he had no right to feel this strongly. The last time Feliciano had been this short and this miserable when offended he had been an Empire who owned and dominated half of the Mediterranean Sea: he absolutely could not afford to be that miserable, bad-tempered little brat again.

He abandoned Scorpius to go and take part in practice, sent Gino out of the common room and threw on fake tears to convince Ellie and Charles to go looking for the animal while Feliciano pretended to help them only to leave the castle with the Hogsmeade carriage. England stayed behind to keep the others misdirected, and when Feliciano ran into Gloria and Margaret in the village right where the carriage dropped him off, he was grinding his teeth looking for any way to get rid of them.

Hogsmeade was one of the only all-wizard villages in Britain. It was all the colour of Diagon Alley with half the noise and twice the excitable shoppers and passers-by. With a train station and several shops to keep commerce going, it wasn’t a very large place, but it had wonderful character.

It wasn’t his first time in Hogsmeade, but he paid for three butter beers just to stop the other two Slytherin girls from pester him. They tried to talk to him about Professor Huntington and the way she’d decided to not like him, but Feliciano just decided the drink was too sweet and refused to finish it. He sat there worrying a warming charm Ellie had made for him between his gloved fingers, scarf and winter robe still wrapped around him in the bright and cheerful body of the Hogsmeade bar where students frequented for snacks and innocent drinks.

He wanted to leave, he wanted to go and do what he’d come into Hogsmeade for, then come back and have an hour-long chat about nothing really important. By the time Margaret slipped away to go talk to a group of their fourth-year friends, the only reason Feliciano didn’t force a break in the conversation was because of what Gloria said as soon as they were alone:

“Did you know Professor Malfoy and Professor Huntington had a row yesterday?” He had no idea what a rowboat- wait a fight, she meant a fight. “Classless, really: not Professor Malfoy, but the American!”

Gloria Flint had a very pretty round face, but sometimes her personality was very ugly and it made the prettiness slip and fall away. She’d started doing something to her black hair to lighten it, making her more of a brunette now with extra curls and twists to the otherwise straight fall so they were up and springy before being clipped back behind her head. She had a pouty kind of mouth and had started wearing a cherry coloured gloss on her lips, but at least she wasn’t caked in make-up at thirteen.

“What happened?” Feliciano didn’t want to waste time asking, but he picked up the gossip as it was offered to him.

“Apparently he heard about the way Professor Huntington called your family out on being- you
“know, like that.” Being like that over a thousand years ago felt like it should have been trivia, not something really worth pointing out. Nevermind that the definition of black magic had been a lot different back then anyways. “And he didn’t hear it from me if that’s what you’re thinking! I would never go tattling just to help you get back at a busy-body like Huntington.”

“I thought you liked her class?” And moments like these were when the ugly bits of Gloria’s personality came out. Feliciano had every reason to hope that she’d grow out of it in a few more years…

“She’s worlds better than Binns, but that’s not saying much really.”

“Why did Professor Malfoy get so upset?”

“Honestly, Feli, don’t you know anything about society?” He ignored the dig with a roll of his eyes and waited for her answer, which Gloria gave with a feisty little smirk and a satisfied roll of her shoulders. “The Malfoy Family had a terrible reputation for black magic during the Wars against You-Know-Who. Why, according to my father, my grandfather was so terrified of Professor Malfoy’s father at one point that he tried to have the famous headmaster Albus Dumbledore sacked from Hogwarts. Black magic is a serious offense here in Britain.” It was a serious offense everywhere…

“My family doesn’t have anything to worry about, but thank you, Gloria.” Nudging his too-sweet bottle of butter beer away, Feliciano started to stand up. “I have to go now, see you in the common room later—”

“What? But we only just sat down!”

“I know, but—” but what? What was he going to say? Instead of finding words right away, Feliciano had his hands open and was looking around them, finally figuring out what to do. “But, listen. I didn’t come down here with Kirkland today. I left Higgs and Gamp up at the school and Malfoy—Scorpius, he’s at Quidditch practice. I just came to Hogsmeade to be alone today. Time to myself you know?” And then the words that had sounded solid in his head came out vain once they hit the air, and Feliciano didn’t even have to see the way she shrank back a little to understand he’d made a mistake. “Wait, listen!”

“No, I understand.”

“No, you don’t!”

“Vargas—”

“Come to the Match with me tomorrow!” What? “I mean- I know you’re going to go anyways, but let’s sit together! We can- no, I’ll bring snacks and we’ll share them! Does that sound alright? Please, I just- today is not a good day for me. I don’t feel well and I just need to be alone until it passes.” He just had to be completely alone so he could shed the feeling of being in absolute isolation. It was twisted and felt wrong, but magic wasn’t meant to follow logic or make outright sense.

“Tomorrow…” She repeated slowly, the hurt look on her face slowly starting to melt away. Feliciano clued in just in time to realize he was too late. “Alright then, but only if I get to choose our seats!” There was a very happy, very genuine smile growing in her eyes and Feliciano tried to be happy to see it there, but it didn’t work.

“Y-yes, of course you can. I don’t mind.” Because he’d just…

“It’s a date then!” Just asked a thirteen year old child…
“A date…” On a date...

He hoped very hard that stammering and fidgeting and ultimately running away from the student-friendly pub were all acceptable teenage-boy reactions to what he’d just done, but at least it got Feliciano away from her and the rest of their peers. The snow was soaking through his pants and his feet were ice cold as soon as he broke away from the main street of the village and began weaving through buildings looking for the edge of the settlement. He pulled the hood of his class robe up over his head before leaving the last row of buildings and cutting into the trees, and if he could have removed the slytherin badge fused to his breast he would have done it. Instead, he had to settle for anyone seeing him already knowing he was a Slytherin and hope they didn’t know which one. He had to leave the tracks he made in the snow behind and hope no one followed him.

This wasn’t Feliciano’s first time in Hogsmeade this year, and before November and its early snowfall had arrived Feliciano and England had already convinced their friends to go along with the inane idea of seeing what the terrain around Hogsmeade were like. Obviously the kids had thought they were insane, but the wandering had been worth the rounds of snacks and drinks the two nations had been forced to buy in exchange for the tiring walk.

Locals who lived under the shadow of the school all probably knew about the dell just a hill and a half away from the edge of town, but as long as they didn’t visit it today, he didn’t care. It was dangerous in winter anyways because the pond was deep enough that it wasn’t frozen over when Feliciano climbed the hill and then slid down to the water’s rippling edge. Taking great care not to fall in, he scurried around the edge where green grass grew in autumn and spring and found the safest place he and England had been able to find without wandering far enough from Hogsmeade to be missed. The land rose up and bent back on itself, and there against the ridge was a very small hollow.

It had once been a massive tree, but either a wizard or nature had split it in two with a lightning-bolt and watched it tip over and settle half under the pond. Its roots were raised up as high as Feliciano was tall when fully grown, its trunk wide open on its side and a squeeze for an adult, just right for a child to scramble through.

Inside it was musty, moldy, and smelled like animals had been burrowing in for winter, but he didn’t care. There was enough space for him to stand or sit and stretch his legs, but he waited patiently first.

Waited a full ten, almost fifteen minutes just to make sure no one had followed him.

He hexed the opening to block any of the light he knew the charm gave off when put on and taken off, then enlarged every piece of clothing he was wearing so nothing would strangle or bite into him, shivering from the cold air that hit his neck when the scarf came loose over his shoulders from being lengthened and widened. It wasn’t just cold in Scotland, it was damp absolutely everywhere.

And then he took the charm off.

Digging into the loosened neck of his shirt and tie, he fished out the ice cold chain and the heavy cross that had a permanent place against his chest, pulling it over his head and then holding it in his hand to watch the faint light from the open trunk glitter off its gem-encrusted surface. Both the watch and the cross were enchanted so that just touching them like this would keep the charm in-tact, a safety precaution in case they ever needed to remove them from wrist or neck to appease someone without breaking their cover.

Holding his breath for a good ten seconds, he dropped the dead girl’s memento on the musty, moldy floor of the hollow.
Instead of a dead tree he might as well have been in a tiny boat loosed in a hurricane, because Feliciano heard himself groaning with nausea as his vision started swimming and he pitched over onto his side, wand clutched in his hand and eyes closed as he kicked weakly trying to shake off the swimming sensation creeping under his skin and knocking his stomach like a punching bag. Everything began aching, throbbing, and stretching until he felt his knees ram up against something and his toes were wet inside his ill-fitted shoes.

But as soon as the nausea and sickness peaked, there came the relief.

‘The markets are stable and holding up well in preparation for America’s expected Christmas-month boom, the winter fashion runs are over and excess products have been moving fluidly through commercial circles.’ Why the first thing that came to him was straight up consumer awareness didn’t matter. He honestly did not care. ‘We have a new Admiral in the Navy and one of my Arab Spring battleships was retired from service- I hope Lovino pressures them into making it a memorial...’ Of course he would think of the Navy and the Air Force first, slowly pressing his hands against the damp surface of the tree wall and pushing himself with a groan onto his back.

The Tiber was flowing, the factories in Genoa were producing, Turin’s banking industry was secure and Milan was enjoying a boon of Northern European Tourists. Venice was currently dealing with a bought of Aqua Alta, but if the weak twist in his stomach meant anything, it would probably recede again before New Years...

Feliciano Vargas melded into the background for several precious, savoured moments, and the Northern Half of the Republic of Italy closed his eyes and fumbled through the backwater of his own mind and selfhood to feel everything he could through the connection.

Aha! The song that had been stuck on and off in his head since getting on the train: he finally remembered the artist’s name and course it was because she'd made it to the number one spot on his local music charts. He hummed a few bars of it and smiled to himself, a warm glow feeding into his mind as he relaxed over moldy wood and dangerously close to ice water.

More things came to him but not enough of it was clear. What he would have given in that moment for a cellphone and a wifi signal. His life would have been complete with thirty precious minutes of internet access- or fifteen: just five?

Five minutes actually being in Venice. A quick run down the street from his Roman office or snatches of the busy chatter of the break room in Turin’s Business Quarter.

So many things he wanted and needed from their next vacation, a month away at the end of December...

But at least he had this. He had the time to just lay here and relax, just give up the disguise and be himself again. It wasn’t enough but it was more than he’d had since September, and he felt his good humour rise up while his blood-pressure, blessedly, began to sink.

So an American woman thought South Italy was a dick. Wasn’t it just the fair truth? South Italy was kind of a dick.

And that woman felt like dredging up Feliciano’s personal mistakes during centuries past, centuries where he’d been King of the Mediterranean and a Most Serene Republic. Of course he’d let it go to his head, and when his Republic had condemned traitors and law breakers to having their legs broken and bodies hung in the harbour with entrails spilling out, why shouldn’t his wizarding communities have perfected their spells of pain and torment? There were plenty of ways to skin a cat and the Republic of Venice had been well-versed with both major approaches: hands-on and wand
poised.

So he didn’t care.

Feliciano did a little bit.

But Italy? Absolutely not. It was below him to be offended by such things and he laid there chuckling to himself, calling himself an idiot under his breath because he really had needed to leave the school behind and run away into the woods trying to get his head around all of this.

Just looking at it, mind stretching comfortably without the festering holds of the charm to bind and constrict him, he understood what about it had been making him so angry too. He’d been taking it personally. Huntington probably meant it personally and that was why, according to Miss Flint, Professor Malfoy had lost his temper with the junior Professor. But Italy Veneziano wasn’t meant to take silly things like that personally, because he wasn’t just a person: he was more. He was beyond being simply human.

The charm was doing its job keeping him firmly grounded in a child’s body, but Feliciano himself still needed to take into account the fact that he was more than human and his anger was far, far more dangerous.

That was simply all there was to it.

He wasn’t really a child.

So he’d better stop acting like one.
Arthur did not appreciate playing babysitter for Italy, but he did in fact keep Charles and Ellie running around the school all afternoon. After convincing them that they should do a thorough search of the library after six rounds of the dungeons, he felt he deserved a reward.

“Before you freak out, it’s not what you think.” Instead he got a headache when Italy finally returned to the castle from Hogsmeade. Arthur was intent on making the other nation repay the favour for him next term after Christmas break, but first he wanted to know why Italy was so bold in the common room about coming up to Arthur’s chair and telling him something terrible had happened.

Had the idiot lost every ounce of sense? Arthur almost jumped up to scream at him for being so damned needy, so irreparably damaged by his own ridiculous ploy and investigation that he’d gone and got himself caught without the charm! Arthur would hang him by his Slytherin tie as soon as the idiot—!

“Kirkland, I said it’s not what you think!”

“They spit it out!”

They went bickering down to the boy’s dormitory, abandoning Scorpius who was so tired from practice that he’d fallen asleep on one of the common room couches while Higgs and Gamp played a round of chess with his board. Arthur was ready to pull his wand and hex Italy back into the ninth century when the idiot put both hands up to calm him and spoke.

“I didn’t get caught,” he insisted, something his relaxed face actually confirmed because for the first time all month Feliciano Vargas wasn’t a pissy, miserable little brat but was his usual chuckling, idiotic self instead. “But I am in trouble and you have to promise not to hit me for it.”

“I will make no such promise.”

“But I need your help!”

Taking the charm off for a few hours honestly had done Vargas a world of good, because he even found the sense of self to burst into fake, frightened tears trying to make Arthur swear not to do what Italy damned well deserved and clock him on the head for acting like a fool. They were still in the midst of a back and forth ‘please don’t get mad!’ ‘I’m already mad you wanker!’ when a surprisingly awake Scorpius stomped down into the dormitory and came right between them. The taller blonde boy with his thin hair tangled and messy over his head from his nap looked ready to tear both of them to the ground, but instead of getting on their case for fighting he turned his back on Arthur and honed in on Italy instead.

“Did you honestly ask that nag Gloria on a date?”

Arthur almost screamed.

“A date!?” Instead he only yelled, much different. “You asked her on a date? We’re in third year and you asked a girl to go out with you!?” Nevermind a mean and spiteful girl like Gloria Flint but a child a thirteen-year-old infant and he had the audacity to—!?

“See, I knew you’d be mad!”

“Vargas!”
Why Arthur wanted Italy skinned and his head mounted on the wall came from the unmitigated disgust of having him flirting with English children. But as soon as Italy turned tail and tried to flee across the dorm, Scorpius bellowed about her being the worst witch in the school and took off after him before Italy finished scrambling over his own bed to get away.

“She’s every teacher’s pet and the only people she’s nice to in this entire school are you and Finnick!” Arthur wasn’t going to waste his breath backing Scorpius up. Instead he charged around the far side of the beds and tried to cut off Italy’s escape route as he tore over the covers of Charles’ bed and jumped at the window like he wanted to run along the wall to escape.

“I hurt her feelings! What was I supposed to do?!”

“Not ask her out!” Arthur yelled, lunging and catching Italy around the neck with one arm, ducking his head under the other nation’s shoulder like a rugby tackle and tossing them both down on the stone floor. Vargas kicked again before Scorpius pounced on him and the three of them just started grappling and pushing trying to wrestle two against one to stay down. “Are you insane!?”

“She came in laughing and chased Ellie off to Myrtle’s toilet!” Italy put his hands up and surrendered, and Arthur was stunned when he looked and grabbed Scorpius’ elbow when the other boy pulled his arm back to aim a punch down at Vargas’s face. “Gamp’s your friend and you snuck off for a date with her worst enemy behind her back!”

What had been two on one changed into a three-way struggle when Scorpius tried to shake Arthur off before deciding that he was a valid target too.

“And you-!” The force Scorpius used to take his arm back made Arthur falter where he was sitting on one of Italy’s legs, and then he took a sharp punch inside the shoulder that shocked him into scrambling away from another hit. “-helped him get away with it!”

“No, that-” Italy tried to speak and then found himself facing down the end of Scorpius’ wand, the two nations left stunned not because they’d been tactically out-done, but because they’d never seen Scorpius go off like this. “That’s not why I went.”

“One more word and you’ll regret it, Vargas! Everybody who went down there today says they saw you!”

Italy pulled his arms up next to his own shoulders but didn’t raise them, he knew better. He surrendered on his back on the dormitory floor and refused to move, Arthur too wary of Scorpius’ righteous anger to risk speaking up.

“Some friends you lot make.” Putting his wand away Scorpius rose to his feet in one smooth motion, still riddled with anger as he hissed the words and stepped off Vargas, heading straight for the dormitory door again. He didn’t say another word, and after he was gone the two nations remained there like that in the silence for another good minute.

Or longer, actually, because even after Italy sat upright and Arthur moved back until he was sitting on the floor and braced his shoulders against the wall, they still didn’t say anything. Arthur didn’t even ask for a proper, calm explanation of events. He still cared of course, but he wasn’t angry and he couldn’t drum up the enthusiasm to talk about school drama or real life beyond the castle walls.

He just… suddenly didn’t feel like talking at all.

It made for yet another intense and unhappy Saturday. Arthur and Italy were both liars as far as their friends were concerned, and for all Flint’s smiling and flirty little waves from across the common
room she still refused to acknowledge Arthur’s half-blood existence.

The closest to understanding that either of them received was Arthur, and it was from Higgs when the larger boy came back to the common room with water squelching in his shoes from Myrtle’s bathroom. He had plenty of anger to pile on Italy with black looks and threatening huffs, and he and Scorpius hogged the third year table and absolutely refused to let the other two off the couch where they’d been directed. Vargas stayed curled up and quiet on one of the green cushions next to Arthur, barely working up the courage to ask where Eliza was before Higgs bared his teeth and scared Italy into giving up conversation.

For Arthur, it was an annoyed look that melted into exasperation and confusion, before finally there were angry words.

“Why would you help him go around and do something like that?”

“I’m telling you now, he didn’t go down there to see Flint.”

But Higgs didn’t believe him. In fact, he probably thought Arthur was even more of a liar for trying to make the plea on Italy’s behalf. In the end they just had to forgo the common room all together to try and find relief before lights out.

“So, how did it all come about?” The library was no good because neither of them really needed to study and they hadn’t thought, or really wanted, to grab government work before leaving. They weren’t up for getting in to trouble wandering the halls either, so despite the cold that Italy hated they took to walking along the open-air paths around the snowy November courtyard. It was dull, but with other students in clusters of threes and fours playing in the snow from the different houses, two Slytherins weren’t worth much comment.

“I ran into them before I even got out of the carriage, so I went with them to the café where all the students go.” From there Finnick had abandoned Italy to his fate and when he’d inadvertently hurt a young girl’s feelings he’d reacted without thinking to make it better. Alright, Arthur could accept that answer.

“If I catch you snogging a minor, Vargas, I’ll have you arrested.” Italy laughed at his threat and shook his head, holding one gloved hand out to catch a few snowflakes on his sleeve. Their presence quieted a trio of small first year Ravenclaws, but they moved on shortly afterwards and heard the chatter resume behind them.

“I didn’t expect something like that from Scorpius.” Italy insisted after a bit more wandering. The two of them came to a brief stop by a glassless window, a warming charm keeping the wind at bay while they saw a group of Hufflepuffs out across the snow doing some Quidditch drills.

“I don’t blame him for it: that girl really is awful whenever your back is turned. It’s all minor stuff I’m sure she’ll grow out of, but in the meantime it’s nasty to watch.”

“Why would she make fun of Gamp though?”

Arthur gave him a punch in the arm, and when Italy whined about that being unfair Arthur just told him he deserved it. For a Romance Nation he was completely inept sometimes.

“At least it’s just one Quidditch match, and everyone was going to go tomorrow anyways!” And he cheered up faster than he had all year whenever something unsavoury came up, so at least there were still the positive results of his brief foray back into adulthood to carry them along.

“Be careful Scorpius doesn’t send a bludger your way.”
“I have nothing to fear, Seekers can’t touch those!”

“But you’re the one who taught him how to lead them along like a dog for a biscuit.” Italy’s lack of outright reaction as good as confirmed that he was screaming on the inside. Arthur, satisfied, left him alone on the matter.

As for how they were going to get out of trouble with the rest of their peers, the Nations had no viable solutions beyond ‘wait for them to calm down’. It was callous to pretend that the rejection didn’t hurt, and it was heartless to suggest that the two of them didn’t care that they’d hurt their friends’ feelings.

Yes, Scorpius, Eliza and Charles were children. But compared to the two of them that made every human being the world over an infant. Factual age didn’t matter, human bonds still hurt to forge and break. They couldn’t just shrug and go ‘oh well, so much for that then!’ and make new friends to pass the time with.

For one, friends or not they still had to room within three feet of Scorpius and Charles in the boy’s dorm. And for another, they’d spent more than enough time getting to know three of the Slytherin third-years that the two of them honestly didn’t want to break away. Even casting aside their mission, having only each other to talk to for the next four years would be unbearably dull. Would it even be worth remaining at Hogwarts without a few basic connections to the legitimate student body?

So, the two of them stood there and watched the snow fall, resolved to wait for the bulk of their friends’ anger to settle. Hopefully, the three of them would talk one another down from whatever angry precipice Scorpius had nearly thrown himself over by pulling his wand on Italy. They could survive the isolation until after the Quidditch match at least, and if it didn’t look like the others were coming around, they would apologize.

It was better than being forced to explain what Italy had really snuck into Hogsmeade for.

“Hey, Arthur.” Arthur’s gaze was angled skyward at the snow spiralling down from the darkening sky. Dinner would be served soon, and this far north the sun said goodbye long before the human day was actually done. “Is that a football?”

“What?” Looking down again, he followed the angle of Italy’s gloved hand where he was pointing across the snow at the Quidditch drills they’d seen earlier, and he was about to remind him of what they were when Arthur noticed a critical flaw in his assumption: you didn’t move a quaffle with your feet.

The two nations stared at the figures in winter robes, looked at each other, and then without another word they vaulted the stone window in front of them and landed on the snow outside that was up to their ankles, tearing across the field as fast as their shrunken legs could carry them.

“Oi!”

“Hey! Hey is that really-!”?

They floundered for about twenty yards and then broke right onto frosted, dormant grass revealed either by an anti-snow charm or wind that had blasted the white powder away. It wasn’t a proper football pitch, but it was more than enough for the scattered group of Hufflepuffs who stopped their game at once as soon as the Slytherins appeared.

In fact, with a second look around Arthur realized he was very wrong about the houses. Yes he did see David Baker and the Finnigan Twins panting in the cold air, but there were also at least two
Ravenclaws and a Gryffindor in the mix as well. An official, regulation-sized football was tumbling slowly over the wet grass at Baker’s feet before his toe stopped it from rolling too far away, and the Slytherins almost shared a look of shame for interrupting.

“You ain’t here to cause trouble, is ya?” One of the Finnigan twins called from across the mini pitch, his brother giving a groan and smacking the other in the arm for his tone.

“What? Of course not!” Italy gasped, horrified by the accusation as Arthur spoke up in a hurry, eyes jumping around looking for whoever was in charge. He didn’t recognize the small red-headed Gryffindor who must have been yet another Weasley, and the Ravenclaws were a mystery too, so that left their classmate David Baker to answer the questions for them.

“I haven’t seen a football in three years!” So he started off with the most desperate part, watching the uneasy way Baker pulled his foot back over the ball and then kicked it up smoothly into his hands. “Haven’t you got room for two more? Vargas and I can help widen the field if we have to.”

The skepticism was obvious on Baker’s pale face. He had a thick, square jaw and high brown curls that made him look even taller than he already was. Higgs was probably the heavier third year, but Baker was Hufflepuff’s best bet at matching him in overall size.

“You two know the rules at all?” It must have been Baker’s ball, because no one else said anything when he gave them an inch.

“English or international?” There was a flutter from the Ravenclaws before the lone Gryffindor spoke up.

“What’s your team?”

“Manchester!” England felt something bite him inside but went with the first name.

“Not Spain!” Italy cared even less.

A chuckle from the twins and a half-smile from Baker who then shook his head.

“You’re daft, Kirkland, Liverpool’s got Manchester beat this season.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Care to put a wager on it?” Baker lifted the ball and let it spin between his fingers, grinning a little bit and loosening up with snow frosting his hair.

“I would, actually!” But before Arthur could start betting chocolate frogs and Charm’s homework, Italy started whining and scuffing his feet.

“Why don’t we play first and bet later? It’s too cold to just stand here!” Of course he’d start giving in to the nippy feeling in his fingers and toes before Arthur could get himself into trouble.

“Vargas’ll come with me and the twins, Kirkland you’re with Weasley, Jackson and White. Got it?” The two Slytherins shared a quick grin and then hurried to their respective sides, Arthur’s eyes finding a pair of goal posts made of snow and hurrying between them where a Ravenclaw girl, who he assumed was either Jackson or White, looked surprised and then happy to give up the keeper position to him.

“Don’t let them score on us, Snakeskin.”
“Hey now-” but before he could settle between them, he stopped and raised a hand at her. “There’ll be none of that, I’m on your team, aren’t I?”

The Ravenclaw jumped at his words and blinked the snow off her long dark lashes. She had a much darker complexion than most of the students at Hogwarts and it was curious for Arthur trying to pin down her family’s origins. It didn’t ultimately matter, she was as English as they came with that accent.

“Oh- sorry? Does it mean something rude?”

“A little bit, yes.” The way she opened her brown eyes up wide at that was a curious thing, but Arthur smiled to make sure she knew he wasn’t mad. “I’m Kirkland, a third year with Baker. I’d rather you call me that instead.”

“I didn’t know, I just-” He was getting that impression from her, yes. It was quite alright so long as she didn’t do it again. “Manpreet White, second year. I’m sorry I didn’t know!”

“You can make up for it by scoring on Vargas then.”

“Oi! I said are you ready, Kirkland?”

Saturday evening rebounded from that dreadful afternoon with almost an hour of running and passing in the snowfall, a few ghost lights keeping the unofficial pitch lit as positions changed regularly and everybody had to adjust to the discomfort of trying to play a kicking game in heavy winter robes.

It had simply never come up in Charms or Astronomy that Baker was from a purely muggle household, although Arthur was reminded that the Finnigan twins had a muggle mother. White’s family was half immigrants from India, half English magic folk, and Arthur figured out which Weasley he was playing with as they trudged their tired, shivering, soaking wet way through the castle to a hot dinner.

“I’m Rose’s brother, Hugo.” Hugo Weasley was as tall as Italy, which was impressive until you remembered how tiny Feliciano Vargas was and compared it to Hugo being in first year. “Are you really the Arthur Kirkland she’s always talking about? How do two pure-blood Slytherins know about football anyways?” Ah yes, Rose Weasley, Arthur’s least favourite Gryffindor.

“One, not a pure-blood.” He answered, gesturing to himself. “And two, both raised around muggles.” A sweep of the hand to include Italy, who was gabbing happily with the Finnigan twins. “I don’t think it matters much what your sister thinks of me, really, she doesn’t control you or who you make friends with. Back to football though: I absolutely love it. You?”

“I still like Quidditch better, but my grandpa takes Rose and I to football matches all the time. Makes it kinda special.”

“You were the only Gryffindor on the pitch, do any others come to these games?”

“None that I know of. There’s a proper muggle-born boy in my class, but he doesn’t give a wit about sports, wizard or muggle.”

When they entered the Great Hall they had to filter over to their own house tables. Miss White continued to walk with him and Italy while Hugo and the Hufflepuffs separated across the hall, but she gave them a polite nod before sitting down with a group of what looked like fourth year friends. As the Slytherins wandered down the side of their own long table to find the section normally occupied by the other third years…
“There you are!” Arthur saw Scorpius’ platinum blonde head hunkered down and saying something to Higgs across the table. The first person to speak to them was Gloria Flint who stood up right in front of both nations and then promptly ignored Arthur’s existence. She put a terse little scowl on her face and gave Italy a very brief thrashing. “Why, you’re soaking wet, Feliciano! Absolutely dripping, what were you off doing? You must have been rolling around in the snow to get so much of it on you! Why didn’t you come sit with Peggy and I instead of leaving in a huff like that?”

“Er, Gloria…”

In the end Italy was successfully coerced to sit next to Gloria, sandwiched between her and the fourth years and leaving Arthur standing there with no readily available place to sit. Italy shot him a desperate look but honestly Arthur pitied him more than resented being left as the odd-one out. It gave him the motivation to draw a deep breath, set his shoulders back, and walk down the next few seats to reach the other third-years.

There was a seat beside Ellie and she scooted down to open up space between her and Scorpius instead, but before Arthur could try and take it: Charles’ Care of Magical Creatures book jumped up on the bench and growled at him, snapping it’s jagged pages like teeth inside the green cover.

“Charlie stop it.” Ellie came to his unwilling rescue, voice fragile from what sounded like too much crying and bloodshot eyes unable to rise and look at Arthur directly. Before she fully calmed the book down with a tender stroke along the gold lettering of its title, Scorpius’ book bag came up and took over the vacant space instead.

Arthur took a breath to demand if they really expected him to be Vargas’s babysitter and if his stupid blunder was worth all this trouble, but then he took a proper look at Charles’ aggressive face and the brittle way Scorpius had his lips pursed together and lost the will to fight with them. They were mad, and only time was going to settle them down.

“Am I at least allowed to cheer for you at the match tomorrow?”

“You’d better.” Was Scorpius’ answer, and with that, Arthur was banished to spend the rest of the night sitting between a pair of second years and listening to his underclassmen fret about the upcoming Quidditch match. He didn’t get to see Italy again until he returned to the dorms and the two nations had to just keep tip-toeing around their dorm-mates.

“She’s not going to leave me alone until New Years, is she?” Italy lamented, throwing himself on his bed after they both shed their wet clothes and soaked up some heat in the baths, hiding in their dorm to keep away from the ugly looks and obvious flirting. Italy just flopped down with his face in his pillow, white cat pawing across his back to settle between his shoulder blades while Arthur sat on his own bed twiddling his thumbs and being quite useless.

“If you aren’t careful she’ll go sending you a present for Christmas.”

“I like presents and I like pretty girls, but she-”

They were shut up by Scorpius stomping down into the dormitory, changing into his night-clothes and promptly going to bed. They understood that he was going to have an early morning tomorrow, and to avoid the wrath of their house for keeping Slytherin’s seeker awake, the nations promptly stopped talking and left their irate friend alone. They feared what would happen if they showed their faces in the common room- Arthur was Eliza and Charles’ least favourite person after the goose-chase he’d led them on, and Flint would attach herself to Italy’s arm if he showed his face again. They made themselves settle down and went to sleep at nine o’clock on a Saturday night.
Arthur’s best word for it was *degrading*, but such was the lot of a child.

England could go on about it as much as he wanted, Feliciano knew he was twice the gentleman Kirkland claimed to be when it came to taking women out on the town and making them feel as beautiful and worthwhile as he honestly felt they were.

But even he had to admit that going on a play-date was very very different from what he usually did. First of all, Feliciano couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt like his hands were tied going into a social event, whether a private meal or a public outing.

“You’re not really going to hold one of those, are you?”

“Oh- I was?”

Second, he’d never had his accessories or fashion sense questioned by a woman, nevermind a little girl like Gloria Flint. The self-waving silver streamer he’d helped a few other Slytherins charm in the common room was forced out of his hand and given to an over-eager looking first year to carry instead. This left Feliciano empty-handed as far as Quidditch went, just a little paper bag of the promised cauldron cakes and chocolate frogs for him and his *‘date’* to share from the top of the tower.

Third-

“No no no, you said *I* would choose where we sit!”

-Feliciano just didn’t ask mean people on dates. It wasn’t how he chose to go about being sociable, but he was starting to come to the sad understanding that Gloria Flint was as spoiled by her family as she was convinced of their pure-blooded superiority. She was a little princess, stubborn in a way that wasn’t cute and made Feliciano want to take her by the arm when she pushed one of the second years out of the seat she wanted and tell her: *no, that’s not how young ladies behave in public.*

But he couldn’t do that. He had to just obediently sit in the far back corner of the Slytherin Quidditch tower, jammed under the awning so he could barely see the pitch or the hoops for either team. Yes he was protected from the November wind, but no he didn’t like the idea of being pushed into a corner by a little girl who wasn’t interested in the sport at all.

“Didn’t your father play Quidditch at Hogwarts?” Feliciano had made a point of not liking or being interested in the sport for two years now, but he was determined to make that the topic of conversation as the rest of the school filled their benches and his date made it ever more clear that he wasn’t allowed to try looking for his friends in the crowd- not after she’d dragged him so far ahead of England and the others to get here and snag the worst seats in the tower. “I thought I saw his name on one of the-”

“Oh yes, Daddy just loves Quidditch.” Maybe there would be hope for this afternoon then if she-

“But I think it’s positively dreadful, don’t you? Malfoy’s such a twit to go on about it all the time, it’s a wonder you can keep your head on straight around him.”

“Scorpius is my *friend,*” Feliciano reminded her, desperately keeping half an ear open for the announcements at the start of the match. He couldn’t hear anything yet… “And so this Arthur.”

“Which boggles my mind, that Kirkland boy is just freeloding off the Kirkland-”
Feliciano opened his mouth with the biggest, fakest smile he could drum up to tell her to absolutely not finish that sentence, but the blessed megaphone blare stopped him:

“WELCOME, HOGWARTS SCHOOL, TO THE FIRST MATCH OF THIS YEAR’S QUIDDITCH HOUSE CUP TOURNAMENT!”

It also left him half-deaf, because with a frantic look around their corner of the observation tower Feliciano saw exactly how short-sighted Flint had been by blazing a path over into a private cranny of the bleachers. Behind the two of them on the wall and mounted just above their heads was a great big brass bowl with holes punched through it, a wizard speaker that vibrated with an excitable, radio-style voice that drummed up enthusiasm and started introducing players and changes since last year.

“REIGNING HOGWARTS CHAMPIONS: TEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAM GRYFFINDOOOOORR!” If Feliciano correctly remembered how much commentary went into every Quidditch match, then there was no way they were going to get any talking done at all. He was happier than he should have been.

But it also meant, between watching Gloria pout and clap her hands over her ears every few seconds, that Feliciano received a play-by-play description of the match after the loud roar of the Slythering team launching from inside the tower signaled the start of practice laps and aerial warm-up drills. The school had a good memory for foul plays, and the new announcer tempted the wrath of the championship house by giving a cheerful, albeit deafening, reminder:

“SLYTHERIN SEEKER SCORPIUS MALFOY PROVED HIMSELF LAST YEAR A CAPABLE FLYER IN THE SLYTHERIN-HUFFLEPUFF MATCH, WILL JAMES POTTER COUNTER WITH THE SAME AGGRESSIVE TACTICS AS THESE TWO SEEKERS FACE OFF FOR THE GOLDEN SNITCH?” Only being able to play each team once a year made for some of the fiercest Quidditch Rivalries Feliciano could remember in a long time. At least in other sports like football and racing, professional athletes could expect to go toe-to-toe more than just once a season. “WELL GET READY, HOGWARTS, BECAUSE WE’RE ABOUT TO FIND OUT: THE CAPTAINS ARE SHAKING… THE SNITCH IS RELEASED… AND ON DESFORD’S WHISTLE… THE GAME IS ON!”

There were snacks to share, but the noise meant that there was little for Gloria Flint to enjoy. In order to avoid some kind of open conflict, Feliciano avoided smiling or enjoying himself too obviously. Less than ten minutes in to the blaring noise and the rocketing speed of passing broomsticks, even the nation had to admit he already had a pounding headache and a growing, desperate need for Scorpius to catch the snitch as soon as possible.

But at least, as a team, Slytherin was performing well.


As much as he wanted the match to end, he didn’t want Slytherin to lose.

“TEN POINTS TO SLYTHERIN FOR THAT SCORE BUT- WAIT! MALFOY’S IN A DIVE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION! SOMEONE’S FAKING AND WHOEVER ISN’T IS- LOOK AT MALFOY GO HE’S GOT POTTER SCREAMING ACROSS THE PITCH LIKE AN OWL THROUGH A THUNDERSTORM! IF MALFOY MEANS IT THEN- OH!!”

The crowd gave a gasp and there was a roaring sound across the pitch from the other towers Feliciano couldn’t see, the nation getting up and trying to see through the rest of the house where
students were clamouring up for a better look. It was hopeless sitting here to try and see anything except the quick rise and fall of England’s head several rows in front of him, but finally after a desperate pause and groaning noises, the announcer brought her mic back up.

“BLUDGER TO THE SHOULDER AND A LONG FALL FOR POTTER. HE’S OKAY, FOLKS, AND DESFORD’S WHISTLE STOPPED THE CHASE, BUT THAT WAS A NASTY BLOW FOR GRYFFINDOR’S STAR SEEKER. NO FOUL THOUGH: THE SEEKER GOT IN THE WAY OF A SMART CRACK BY SLYTHERIN BEATER NANCY CLEMENCE AIMED FOR CHASER ALBUS POTTER WITH THE QUAFFLE.” It seemed fortunate enough: Albus didn’t get hurt and there was no foul against Slytherin for James’ injury! “PLAYERS ARE LINING UP… DESFORD’S GOT THE QUAFFLE… WE’RE BACK IN ACTION!”

And Feliciano’s head was honestly beginning to pound. All he needed was another five minutes of play-by-play before finally hearing what he wanted.

“THE SEEKERS ARE JOSTLING FOR POSITION… THE SNITCH IS JUST WITHIN REACH! WAS THAT A KICK FROM POTTER? IT DOESN’T MATTER BECAUSE MALFOY JUST ROLLED OUT OF RANGE AND WHAT A BURST OF SPEED HE JUST PUT OUT! THAT’S IT!” What’s it wasn’t a valid question, because every row of Slytherin students exploded in an inward wave of excitement, silver streamers and green banners, wands up high with sparks flying with the house colours, friends jumping and grabbing each other in hugs so they could scream and laugh over the blare of the voice-over: “MALFOY’S GOT THE SNITCH! ONE HUNDRED FIFTY POINTS TO SLYTHERIN! THIS MATCH IIIIIIIS OVER!”

And with it went Feliciano’s unwanted date!

Only good things came from the parade of cheering Slytherins roaring for their victorious team even a good fifteen minutes after their win. Slytherin let the Gryffindors slink back up to their tower dormitory to brood before leaving the Quidditch pitch, most of them waiting happily outside the team’s change room to gather their heroes and usher them down to the dungeons. Feliciano lost Gloria in the push to get down from the tower, and he made the decision not to look for her once he caught up with Higgs and was given a forgiving hug and excited clap on the back.

“I didn’t see a thing! Tell me it was amazing?”

“It was incredible, Vargas! You should have seen how fast he was going!” Higgs forgave him for everything and Ellie came up bouncing on her toes. Her excitement gave him a genuine reason to smile as Feliciano started bouncing and then outright jumping as he fed off the happy energy and glee. He hadn’t seen England grin and laugh so easily in months.

As a massive, cheering hoard the Slytherins circled and swept around their Quidditch team, clearing the way through lingering Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs to find their common room. Feliciano thought he saw David Baker at one point and spun around, walking backwards, to wave happily after him and got a laugh and a wave back from his classmate, then hurried to keep up with the rest of his house.

“You! You’re still a bit of a tosser!” Half an hour later with Hogsmeade butter-beers circulating around the room and several chocolate frogs frantically leaping throughout the dungeon, Scorpius forgave him too. “But you should have seen the look on Potter’s face when Desford didn’t call a foul! Bloody murder in his eyes!”

Laughing, jumping, candy and songs. Their troubles felt eased and the weekend, along with the rest of November, came to a happy close.
The first week and a half of December went by smoothly for Slytherin. But with Christmas fast approaching there came the usual efforts to round up friends for holiday visits.

“Scorpius-”

“Just one time can you not let your family drag you back to Italy?” Feliciano felt forgiven by this point for a bad date whose only follow-up had been Feliciano eagerly chatting to Gloria about the Quidditch match and Feliciano’s friends not letting the two of them be alone again. Despite that, he wasn’t really sure how to let Scorpius down easily for the third year in a row.

“I would, Scorpius, I just- can’t.” He didn’t know what Lovino was planning for the holidays because his brother had fallen out of contact again, but he’d been shown the great danger in sending angry letters to Rome and was saving it until Christmas and his flight home.

For the moment, Feliciano and Scorpius were walking towards History of Magic after a brief detour that saw the nation chasing after David Baker on his way to a different class. There had only been one more football game after the weekend Feliciano and England had been kicked out of their common room, and he’d wanted to check and see if there would be one more before the end of term. They weren’t going to be late to class, but they were going quickly.

Football had brought up Feliciano’s muggle-like upbringing, and upbringing meant talking about family, and family led to Christmas break. It was actually a very logical progression for once!

“Your brother still sounds awful in my mind.”

“Trust me, Lovino is much different in private! He’s still mean, but a different kind of mean!” The sort to wake Feliciano up with angry yelling in the morning, not sit at his desk and conjure black clouds because he was upset. Scorpius didn’t believe him, but that was okay. “And he’s hardly the worst member of the family.”

“That just makes it worse!”

Feliciano was laughing when they reached the History classroom and suddenly stopped, because there were fifteen students in Ravenclaw and Slytherin robes standing out in the hall, and as soon as they noticed Feliciano and Scorpius arriving there was this sudden flurry through everyone and rapid attention that turned straight on the nation.

He stopped dead, waited until he saw England frantically waving his arms trying to get the two of them to come closer, then hesitantly stepped forward again.

“What’s going-?”

“Shh! Vargas get over here!”

He was seized by both arms at once, one by Arthur and the other by a Ravenclaw he half-recognized as Miss Miller before he was man-handled all the way to the classroom’s shut door, plopped down and forced to stand there in confusion. He was just trying to turn around and get a proper explanation when he heard it: his language.

“Seven times!” Standard Italian in a woman’s voice, her words harsh and clipped so sharply on the ends that he thought he recognized- “Seven times you have made your request and seven times it has
been denied! You have asked the national wizarding galleries and the Ministry of Magic in Rome and you have been told no by all of them- if you send one more letter to the Milanese gallery then they will blacklist you for pestering them, do you not understand?"

And then he heard something almost as startling:

“No, I think it is you who does not understand.” Stilled from lack of use, but functionally pure and accent impressively on point: it was Professor Huntington and Feliciano raised a quick hand to silence the person who hissed for him to translate. “The situation at this school is serious and in order to properly investigate I need-”

“All I am trying to do is to protect the artifacts here at Hogwarts from people like you!” Feliciano raised his voice and tried to calm her down. “You crossed a line by bringing my husband’s family directly into your petty investigation, especially with your wanton attempts to use that brat as a way to bolster your own name. What does the Vargas Family care that you’re the Venetian’s teacher? You are still asking to take national, family treasures and hang them for your vandal to come and murder! You have absolutely no understanding of our Ministry’s position on Hogwarts and its inability to structure and protect anything of value housed within these walls! You insult us!”

“The ministry or the family?”

“Both!”

“Then I don’t know what it is with you old-world Europeans, but allowing head families to get in the way of progress for the sake of their own pride is something to be ashamed of!”

Feliciano jumped back like the door had burnt him, meaning he backed up right onto one of his Ravenclaw classmates and then kept going. He was absolutely not going to be caught dead by either woman on the other side of that door listening to their conversations: he’d rather throw himself out the high window across the hall first!

Except the students didn’t agree with him, and he was caught before he got more than two Ravenclaws deep into the crowd trying to force himself away. When he started hearing whispers asking where he was going Feliciano hissed “To safety!” and struggled a little harder.

He didn’t make it, and he heard the last part of the argument only because the small, fierce woman on the other side of the door dug down in herself to draw out power without volume that propelled her voice in a way that would have made Grandpa Rome proud- and a little bit scared.

“You ignorant American: I have no more patience to waste on you.” She didn’t even shout, she barely raised her voice beyond the volume of a speaking voice. The raw power Chiara of Sicily put into her words put a definite end to the argument and finally made the third years clue in that this was not a discussion they should have been trying to eavesdrop on. The class split in two and fell back away from the door, and Feliciano ended up losing his footing on the edge of his robe and the sudden loss of support from students who had been holding him up. He only hit his knees on the stone floor, but he heard the door swing open before he could get back on his feet and hide properly.

There were more than just two people in his household with the surname Vargas. Feliciano had actually been very careful to shrink the number down during his unification wars, struggling out from under Austria’s foot and making the effort to take Rome from the church before unifying with his brother. In the north now adays there was only himself and his brother Seborga worth mentioning, with San Marino keeping quietly to his hill and not bothering anyone. If Feliciano wanted to see more of his immediate brothers and sisters, then he had to look south to Lovino’s home instead.
And if he did, then the first nation he’d find was Sicily.

Chiara of Sicily was a beautiful woman, and she had been since the end of the Napoleonic wars. Not very tall, but stately with her petite form and strong chin forever held a little too high for Feliciano’s tastes. She had flowing black arabesque hair that today was loosely pinned and folded back behind her head with a net of pearls that harkened back to another era when she had stood next to queens and bid princes kiss her feet. Her dark, sun-kissed skin and the straight length of her nose, coupled with the darkness of her eyes, gave her a commanding appearance and she was dressed today to take advantage of it.

She was a province who moved like a capital, surveying the assembled students critically for a moment with her black eyes darkly shadowed by pens and brushes. When she saw him she gliding forward with three long steps under a lavish gown Feliciano mistook for black before the light told him it was an impressive shade of green. The silk brocade and gold cords along the bodice looked almost Baroque, but the fit and cut had been updated, the material lightened, and overall it was exactly the sort of thing a true sorcerous would wear to impress a lowly witch.

Feliciano made sure to back up as she came striding past him, a cold sensation creeping up his neck when he inclined his head just a little bit, clenching his jaw with the force not to snap his eyes back up and watch her. It wasn’t a personal reaction, but one born strictly from political power and arrangements the nation inside this little body didn’t want to see changed. He was the stronger half of the nation, and she was only a lesser member of his brother’s weaker household. He did not bow or shy away from her, that wasn’t the way things worked.

But the thirteen-year-old younger brother of a powerful warlock did not boldly stand in the way of his sister-in-law, especially not after she’d just come out of a fierce argument with one of his professors. She paused briefly when she passed him, settled herself without indicating him, and then swept on down the corridor. Through the icy cross under his clothes, North Italy felt himself resenting this self-inflicted curse all over again.

Filtering into the heavy silence of the classroom in the immediate aftermath of the argument just made everything worse.

Professor Huntington did not like him. It had nothing to do with his grasp of history—Italian or otherwise, she simply did not like him. She ignored any questions he tried to ask, selected him to answer questions only if his was the only hand for five minutes to dare leave the desk, and made a point of underlining the seedy facts of Italian wizarding history by pin-pointing every incident of brutality and death carried out by any Vargas name, regardless of whether that so-called branch of the family was still around. If she didn’t like him on a normal basis, then dealing with him after he’d just heard half her argument with a member of his family was just going to make things even worse—he just had to fret about how things were supposed to escalate.

The entire lecture was given with Professor Huntington looking more stressed and upset than Feliciano had probably ever seen her, to the point where she even stumbled in the middle of her lesson and stood there looking furious. Feliciano just knew to drop his gaze firmly to his textbook and try to take additional notes from there in order to avoid eye-contact with her.

But in the end, she still called on him to stay after class.

And she told England and Scorpius off when they lingered with him.

And she took five points from England for being insubordinate when he argued again that he wanted to just stand by the door.
So, Feliciano had to play meek and humble in front of a teacher who’d decided to not like him. He kept his hands behind his back and eyes down at the orange ruff along the edge of Professor Huntington’s turquoise robe and over the curled toes of her red shoes. He was coming to dislike the pallet of her attire.

“I suppose, Mister Vargas, that you enjoyed eavesdropping this afternoon?”

“It wasn’t on purpose, Professore—”

“Professor. This is not an Italian school.” Why did she have to be like that? Shouldn’t she have been happy that she had someone to practice with and keep her Italian sharp? “Do you understand how deeply inappropriate your snooping was?” Huntington had her arms folded in front of her and Feliciano refused to look up at her face. For one she’d find it rude of him and for another she probably had her red lips pulled down in a horrible frown.

“I didn’t really understand it.”

“That is a lie.”

“No!” But then he looked up when she accused him of something he hadn’t meant! “I understood the words, yes, but not what you were talking about! My brother has stopped writing so often and I never speak to Chiara at all!”

“So, you do know her.” Professor Huntington’s frown was not as severe as he’d feared, not a great big upside-down U perverting her face like a terrible clown, but the angry rosebud of her tinted mouth was still angry. He tried to talk back and found himself chaffing against the fact that he had to defend himself. What was happening between Rome and this awful school?

“Oh course I do: she’s my brother’s wife and- and…” He was trying to make a miserable attempt at peace, a withered olive branch that he half-raised and then had to let fall. He almost admitted: ‘she doesn’t like me, and I don’t like her very much either.’ But whatever the internal, hidden problems, his tongue was going to physically drop out of his mouth and wriggle away across the floor if he dared drag family business out into the sun to please a foreigner. He couldn’t do it. Two hundred years of fussy relations with Sicily weren’t going to make North Italy speak poorly of his sister to a stranger. “Of course I know her. But she didn’t come to see me- we didn’t even speak!”

“But you did listen, and for that—” Feliciano didn’t even see her wand until it was pointed between his eyes, and he vowed to absolutely never bow his head in front of her again. He opened his mouth to demand to know what on earth she was doing when it hit him.

He didn’t hear what she said, he just saw a brilliant orange flame with a blue core and livid outline spew from the end of the wand and slide straight into his mouth. He tried to scream and his whole body reacted to kick him away from the spell but it didn’t work: he moved but the sound was backed up in his throat until he gagged, the flames completely without pain until a violent cramp gripped the base of his tongue and sank into his jaw, anchoring itself harshly until he roared wordlessly and tried to clamp his jaws shut to stop it.

He slammed into one of the desks trying to get away, bashing his arm just above the elbow and stunning the hand before he could get his wand out properly. The spell was over before he could regroup, and he didn’t know what exactly his face did but he felt it burning up every part of him on the inside: how dare she.

“An over-reaction if I ever saw one.” His teeth were tingling and his mouth felt numb, the pain fading quickly once the fire went out. “You’re perfectly fine, Mister Vargas, but utterly forbidden
from breathing a word of what passed between Missus Vargas and I to anyone else in the school, understood?”

“How dare you!” He hated the young voice that bounced back from the walls and hit him. He hated how young it sounded when he was angry, so down-right insulted that he couldn’t find the will to run away from it. He was so outraged he let his voice barrel straight into the language they both spoke but she somehow hated: “I am your legal charge and ward under the laws of this school! How dare you conflate me with officials in Rome and blame me for your own lack of success! How dare you hex me for your own petty sense of pride!” And then he just- “You idiot witch! Without Lovino’s signature the only one who can grant you access to the Italian archives is me!”

It went without speaking that he would never, not in a thousand years, give Hogwarts that access now. He didn’t know what purpose she had in asking for more art for a school that couldn’t care for what it already had. He didn’t know why she was making such a violent push for it that Chiara herself had been forced to come to Hogwarts in broad daylight to tell Huntington to her face that no, Italy would not consent, but he no longer cared.

Italy would not consent.

North Italy would not give his blessing.

Feliciano Vargas would cut out his own hexed tongue before even thinking about it.

“That will be twenty points from Slytherin for such a disgusting outburst.” How dare she- “And ten for forgetting yet again which country you are in!” How dare she-! “And if you dare raise that wand at me, Vargas, I will have you expelled.”

He hadn’t felt himself draw his wand. In fact, he was only aware of it because she pointed it out. There was a slim chance that, had he not been so furious at that moment, he might have been worried to find the weapon so readily in his hand. Instead he was very seriously weighing the possibility that he could call her bluff, only to understand that no, it wasn’t an empty threat, and Feliciano couldn’t afford to be tossed out of this school for something so petulant.

He put his wand away, straightened his class robes with a hard yank on his front, and stood straight.

And Professor Alice Huntington was standing taller than him only because she was an adult of full height and his spine was compressed and shrunk to conform this irritating little body. She stood there with her nose in the air, red hair curled and styled perfectly around the back of her head, red lips pursed and flamboyant robes glaring harshly in the glow of her classroom.

In four years he promised himself, when this ruse was done, he was going to slap that haughty look off her face without even lifting a finger.

“Will there be anything else, Professor?” But in the meantime he just had to suffer with it.

“No. You are excused.”

So he bowed without taking his eyes off of her, turned sharply on his heel, and marched at double-time to leave her toxic presence behind.

He just had to suffer and wait.
That Italy had been cursed by Professor Huntington was obvious. Really, all Arthur had to do was see his face after leaving the classroom to know exactly why there had been screaming behind the doors only minutes before.

What was incredible was the fact that he did nothing about it.

He wouldn't even tell them what, exactly, Professor Huntington had done to him, and stormed away from Scorpius when he tried pressing him for answers.

Arthur tried waiting and didn't bother him about it for the rest of their lessons. He didn't even ask when they went to dinner or drifted back down to the Slytherin commons that night. What was strange about it was how several times over those hours of voluntary silence, Italy would touch Arthur's robe, or take a deep breath to say something, but then as soon as Arthur was able to look at him the other nation would put on a concerned, irritated face and then fall back into silence. Italy even refused to come clean that evening or at least describe what had transpired, Arthur was left watching Charles of all people take the smaller Slytherin by the arm and drag him down to the dormitory for a chat.

It was hard not to feel sorry for Eliza who had been fretting the exact same way over Italy all evening, but the gender charm blocked her from going down. It was up to Arthur and Scorpius to make sure Italy didn't end up getting beaten up by their larger friend.

"You have got to tell the professor." Charles, thank goodness, had grown a sounder head on his wide shoulders since last year. "Whatever she did to you, you have to tell him."

Arthur didn't even have to speak up, he just stepped into the well-lit chamber with their four stone beds all aglow and saw where Charles had sat Italy down firmly and was giving him a stern talking-to. Scorpius followed right behind him and was the one to shut the door tight so none of the other Slytherin boys could overhear them. "I like Huntington, yes, because she's miles ahead of Binns. But you still have to come clean."

Italy, who had been docile since leaving the History room, just shrugged and let his hand run down Gino's back, the puffy feline ignorant of the mood and just looking for affection from its master.

"I'll go with you, Vargas." Arthur didn't see Italy's reaction to that statement because he turned around and gave a shocked look at Scorpius for speaking up. It was the first time all year he'd been anything but resentful of the idea of going up to his father's office on the fourth floor. "He won't get mad about it, it's part of his job to help Slytherins."

Italy's feet still barely reached the floor when he sat on his bed. They really would have to give him a growth-spurt when they got back to London for the Holidays, but he just hooked his ankles together and rubbed his cat behind the ears a little bit. He hadn't smiled all day except to give those forced, borderline-frightening expressions of his. He was so two-faced he'd shut up half of Gryffindor during Potions just by throwing one at them without a word. If Arthur hadn't heard him mutter about someone passing a tray of vegetables down during dinner he would have feared she'd actually taken his voice away.

Instead of saying anything now, he just looked at Arthur and it was the most uncomfortable he'd felt all day.

"Don't stare at me, I agree with them!"

"I'm fine," was what he finally came up with, kicking his shoes off and swinging his legs up onto his bed so he could lay down, dragging Gino up onto his chest for cuddles and setting all three of them
"You liar!"

"You're not fine, you almost bit Potter's nose off in Potions!"

"What was he like in your spare block then, Kirkland?" Scorpius turned the question on Arthur while Charles unsuccessfully tried to get a rise out of Italy where he was laying on the bed being absolutely passive in the discussion. Arthur thought back to the spare hour and a half he and Italy had due to leaving Divination at the doorstep, time usually devoted to homework but today taken up with a visit to Professor Parkinson's office to count pins for her first-year lessons. A boring ninety minutes if there ever were.

"I thought it better not to ask right away, but basically just like he is now." Moody and quiet, which was so frustrating for their classmates that Arthur didn't feel like he needed to get involved with telling Italy the exact same thing he was already hearing. Whatever had happened, he needed to report it sooner rather than later.

"Vargas you screamed- Arthur and I both heard you!" He just let Scorpius take the wheel.

"She just startled me."

"While doing what?" And Charles was there to back him up.

"She-" Arthur realized too late what was going on. It was the same thing that had been happening all day during quiet moments and at the edges of those near-breaks in Italy's silence. He took his deep breath and he scowled so miserably with his brows pulled down and eyes focused on the domed ceiling, but then instead of speaking he stopped.

He stopped, and Arthur watched his throat stretch and move like he was swallowing, and then there was the pronounced movement of a cough that Arthur couldn't hear but which the cat certainly felt. As a familiar, it meant something even more when Gino abruptly stopped purring and lifted his head up to look at his master. Thanks to the animal's excessive poof, Arthur wasn't sure if Italy's hands really did clench a little bit or it was his own imagination.

"She what?" The boys noticed the pause and Arthur stepped around them to get closer to Italy's bed, walking right up to where Italy was resting his head on his pillow. He didn't look petulant laying there with his auburn hair loosely curled and spread out behind his head, his young face was less round than the last two years but still nowhere near the right shape for his adult form. His brown eyes gave his age away completely however, because when he let Arthur finally make direct eye-contact with him for the first time all day, he saw everything he needed to know.

He saw a grown-man's anger burning in a child's eyes, and understood the very firm grip Italy was keeping on his temper. There was a reason he hadn't told Arthur anything during their ninety minutes alone in the Transfiguration room. There was an even better one for why he hadn't blown off Potions all together and gone storming up to the infirmary, or even McGonagall's office.

"Leave him alone about it; he's not gonna say anything." So Arthur understood that he was being asked to play the Best Friend card again, and turned around with a shrug and a careless nod of the head. "The big baby probably shrieked when Hunt jumped off her stage at him. Wet your pants a little bit, you ninny?"

"Why is it always with the name-calling!?" And Italy responded by dragging his rage down under a whine and pushing Gino off his chest so he could grab one of his blankets and pull it up over
himself. Arthur didn't let him get away with it when he heard Charles laugh a little, turning around and pulling his wand out to start poking at the sheets and heavy green winter quilt.

"Big blue monster with her orange hair and red lips, sounds like something from a muggle story book!" And Arthur let at least one colour-changing charm off his wand tip, a ghastly shriek from under the blanket telling him he'd either got a patch of skin or the hair he'd been aiming for.

"Stop it!"

"Well, when you've finished dressing him up like a clown, drag him back upstairs so Ellie knows he's fine, will you?" Scorpius was the first one to leave and Higgs joined in on the fun of harassing Italy until he was properly smiling, or at least making a genuine effort not to be miserable. With Christmas break so deliciously close, Arthur fully expected that evening to be the end of it. Whatever magic Huntington had worked on Italy, they would sort it out themselves and decide, as adults, what to do about it.

The last of their exams wrapped up a few days later and Professor Huntington faded to the back of Arthur's mind, barring one painful afternoon with her exam where he either completely failed or just barely scraped by with answers pertaining to France. Arthur desperately tried to visualize the texts he'd read on Italian history with regards to the black magic body parts trade: pre-1500.

Needless to say, he was ousted as the highest scoring student in third year to Rose Weasley, and Arthur wanted to claw his eyes out reading the scroll in the great hall on the day of the Hogwarts Christmas express. Scorpius was there to lend moral support.

"It's not so bad, Kirkland."

"I'll remind you of that next time Slytherin loses a match."

"That's hardly the same thing!"

Italy still wasn't entirely himself, but he'd gotten over much of his anger and had been working diligently to keep Ellie from worrying about him, chatting with her happily about Christmas and gifts and what sorts of things she'd like or maybe do over the holidays. Gloria Flint, as expected, staunchly refused to be ignored in favour of Gamp and had been hovering on the periphery of their little group for the last nine days.

The lot of them went ahead to the carriages while Arthur and Scorpius had a chat about marks, not afraid of being two Slytherins in a hall of migrating students because with each passing year, being caught not moving in the halls was becoming less and less hazardous.

"They both affect the house the same way!" Arthur argued, not raising his voice too high but definitely firming it up a little. "Quidditch points are house points, and our marks are house points too! You know how it works." The highest scoring student at the end of each year earned an additional ten points around exam time, on top of ten more points for a perfect score for every exam they took. "I'm not interested in Quidditch or duelling, but it should be my name at the top of that list, not Weasley's."

Not that he was going to complain or cause a stir, there was nothing unfair happening at Hogwarts, it was simply England's pride coming to blows with his admiration for a young girl who was currently outperforming him in their lessons. It hurt to land in second place, but it was charming to know it was an English girl taking first.

"But I guess it doesn't really matter, let's go catch up with them." He said.
Arthur swung a foot out to get going and was called back around by Scorpius. The boy in front of him was still very pale—he probably always would be. His face was getting longer but really hadn't changed very much from September, the red beginnings of adolescent oil and acne making their unwanted appearance across his narrow nose and the apples of his cheeks. But he had a sternness that was growing in him, bits of iron collecting in his blood and sticking to his spine to strengthen and straighten it from the timid little boy Arthur had met on a September day two years ago.

"I didn't mean to say Quidditch isn't—"

"It's not about sports." Then Arthur was now doubly interested in what was in Scorpius' head, because the hall was beginning to empty with students drifting elsewhere for the afternoon or down to the carriages so they could ride to Hogsmead and go home for holidays. They'd have to get going soon, but Scorpius just stood there worrying the inside of his cheek between his teeth, hands and arms completely lost under the black fall of his school winter robe. For colour, there was only the Slytherin S on his breast and a ruff of green and silver fur protecting his neck and shoulders from the snowfall waiting outside. "Is Vargas alright, do you think?"

Sensing the mood, Arthur quickly hurried back and closed the distance between them, making it harder for anyone to hear what passed between them and ensuring at least a little more privacy.

"You mean about Huntington?" Scorpius only nodded, his bothered expression melting into a softer brand of concern. "I don't know, what do you think?"

"You're his best friend, he talks to you more than he does me."

"All he's said all week is how much he wants to go home and see his family." Which wasn't far from the truth. Regardless of what Arthur would be able to get out of him in London, it would be South Italy who got the full story in the end. "You look like you want to say something, Scorpius: out with it."

"Would he hate me?" it was a broken question because Arthur was missing a lot of information, but he didn't have to pry: Scorpius knew he wasn't being clear and tried to fix it on his own. "If I went to the Professor. I mean I don't know what happened, but...." But it was something. "Do you think he'd get really mad if I did that?"

The question Scorpius asked wasn't the one Arthur stopped and took a slow breath to consider. He wasn't thinking about Italy. Would Vargas get mad? No, and he definitely wouldn't hate the poor boy for acting in his interests. What Arthur stood there pondering was Hogwarts itself, and that was why he answered the way he did:

"I don't think Vargas can say what's wrong." It was... like a very big metaphor for the same dangerous trends Arthur had come to this place in order to snuff out. "It's not like him not to talk to people, and you know how awful he is at keeping secrets. He's been coughing all over the place and rubbing his mouth like it hurts since it happened."

"She hexed him—more like a curse really." Arthur saw it in the hesitance that gripped Scorpius, how his shoulders tightened up a little and he pulled in a breath looking for a way to slow his thoughts down. "I don't think that's allowed." There was a lie in those words. As a professor's son Scorpius knew it wasn't allowed.

"What do you want to do?"
"I want to help him." It was encouraging to hear him give that answer without hesitating or even thinking about it. "But I don't know what happened and he won't- no, he really can't say anything. I asked him about that woman we saw and he coughed so hard there were tears in his eyes afterwards." His shoulders cinched up a little higher and there was just a spark of anger in his grey eyes. "She's really hurting him."

"Is that allowed?" Scorpius looked so disgusted by the question that Arthur let himself smile back at him. He almost looked like he was going to willingly announce his relation to one of the school's staff members when Scorpius remembered how much he was supposed to resent being 'the Professor's son'. Instead he swallowed the words and said something better.

"Will you come with me?"

"Of course, but let's be quick about it or we'll miss the train."

Scorpius was surprisingly quick to find his father. For all that he gave the serious impression that he never willingly crossed paths with Professor Malfoy while at school, Scorpius moved at a little under a jog to reach a seemingly random classroom on the third floor, knocked twice and impatiently waited to be let inside.

Professor Malfoy was the one who opened the door, a much taller, well-aged version of his son with thinner hair and a pale beard coming in along his chin and narrow jaw. There was no need to describe his usual banded white and green robes, but the ferret resting in a narrow little basket from his belt was a curious addition. Bella the Ferret squeaked happily at the sight of Scorpius and wriggled half-way out of her basket, stubby paws flailing to get closer to him, a curious reaction as the Healer himself looked too surprised to say anything about the two of them being three floors above where they were supposed to be riding their carriage down to the station.

"Dad-" And then Arthur received the additional shock of Scorpius uttering a forbidden word. The boy immediately regretted it when he moved his head a little to see something and his shoulders slumped noticeably under his cloak. "Eh- and Professor Creevey, I... Um-"

Arthur just wanted to give him a proper shove to encourage the words to rise back up, standing there under his own cloak with hands clutching each other. Of course he wanted to help, but that wasn't what he was here for. There was a massive difference between an adult running to other adults with complaints and accusations of misconduct, it was something else for the students to defend themselves and their friends from that same kind of abuse.

So, he watched. And maybe even started to fret.

"Scorpius...?" It was the first time since the train in September that Arthur had heard Professor Malfoy address his son directly, and he did it very quietly and with a slight forward tilt of the head to suggest concern. Arthur wasn't overlooked or ignored, but it was obvious that he was here only as support and that Scorpius was meant to be centre stage.

"Changed your mind about going home for Christmas, Kirkland? It's a wonderful time of year. Draco-" Professor Creevey was his usual smiling self and had been standing further inside the classroom. He came forward now with a holiday spring in his step, speaking easily and casually with first Arthur and then Professor Malfoy to get his attention. There was no walking around the issue with Creevey, and he gestured plainly to himself and Arthur. "Term's over, mate, Kirkland and I can have a chat in the hall while you two take a moment. Promise I won't breathe a word to Neville."

Professor Malfoy looked like he relaxed a little bit, a smile almost breaking out when he tried to answer- only to have Scorpius find his voice again first.
"No- Professor Creevey it's okay, I-" Scorpius was floundering, weight shifting and hands and arms obviously fidgeting under his cloak, but he was determined and Arthur was encouraged by what he was seeing. "I have a few- some- I want to know about punishments at Hogwarts."

He got himself over the highest hurdle, and as the two professors shared a brief look, Arthur considered his anxieties soothed and put on his best look of concern to mask how pleased he was. Professor Malfoy was quick to step back into the classroom and silently invited them in, allowing Creevey to fill the space with a jovial tone of voice that matched the dark indigo of his robes this afternoon.

"Planning a holiday heist, Mister Malfoy? Want to know how to keep yourself out of trouble before we wake up and the roof of the Great Hall's gone missing?"

Creevey was talking to lighten the mood, and it almost worked until Scorpius' awkward fumbling with the topic came back. Their Defense teacher hiked one leg up to sit on one of the desks in the empty classroom, some scrolls and books out with quills abandoned where they must have been having some kind of meeting before this interruption. Arthur was keenly aware of the fact that he was maybe going to miss the train home, but he stuck it out next to Scorpius instead.

"It's nothing like that, sir." Arthur spoke up, ready to give a bit of help now after letting Scorpius take the initial leap without any aid. If he'd asked Higgs to come instead, Arthur was sure Charles would have piped up long before now. "It's about- erm..." Actually, he wasn't terribly sure how to phrase it either, not without suddenly putting the focus on himself and that still wasn't what he wanted. He looked at Scorpius, showing he was also at a loss, and it seemed to cut down some of the other student's nerves. Scorpius swallowed hard, took some strength from Arthur refusing to bail on him, and looked up with his first question.

"Are professors allowed to curse students at Hogwarts?" He wound up staring straight between the two men instead of focusing on one or the other, meaning Creevey and Malfoy both took a quick glance at each other before the Healer gestured for the Defense teacher to take the lead.

"Not for sport, Mister Malfoy, but I think you've been cursed once or twice in my lessons as part of demonstrations and drills, haven't you?"

"I mean as punishment, sir."

"A silencing charm now and then isn't unheard of when someone's a bit too chatty."

"But that's a charm." Scorpius drawing up the difference in spell types made Creevey blink very quickly and shrunk his smile ever so slightly. Sensing an upcoming stretch of silence, Scorpius fumbled for his next question. "Are professors allowed to cause pain then?"

Creevey folded his arms and the two men shared another look, this one longer, and Professor Malfoy's suspicious look was back again. He eyed both of them very carefully and let Creevey speak for him again.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Mister Malfoy." They were on to him and that, Arthur decided, was a good thing.

"Are professors allowed to put painful curses on students?"

Creevey stood up properly and Professor Malfoy straightened up where he'd been leaning back on a different desk. Scorpius' eyes were aimed straight down at the floor now, and he flinched a little despite the cautious voice Creevey answered the question with.
"I'm the only professor here at Hogwarts who teaches curses like that, and I'd never use one on a student."

"I understand- thank you, Professors." Scorpius was absolutely fascinated by the floor and performed a little bow as he spoke, quickly taking a step back. "We have to catch the express back so-"

"Scorpius." Professor Malfoy's voice froze his son completely, but there was no crack or boom, in fact he spoke rather softly while still standing perfectly still in front of them. Even the ferret at his waist was completely silent, perched in her little basket and watching with enough interest to suggest she even understood the things left unsaid. "Dennis, hurry Mister Kirkland down and see if you can manage to get him on the express."

"We've got five minutes left and that train doesn't wait."

"I'd rather wait for Scorpius?" Professor Creevey seemed ready to give it his all and, despite the headaches it would bring him later, Arthur blurted out his response as a question. "If I can? It's alright, I can send my brother an owl." He couldn't stay for Christmas without getting into all kinds of trouble with America and France, but he was allowed to be late for one year.

The air was muddy with awkward feelings. The tension between father and son was so desperately obvious. They did what seemed like their best to keep their relationship out of all Hogwarts affairs and right now, at the very last moment before they could jump out of the school and go back to normal, this conflict was cropping up between them.

Scorpius' head was still weighed down and Professor Malfoy was taking very shallow breaths, barely able to take his eyes off his son standing in front of them and obviously making a go at getting Creevey and Arthur out of the room.

And Arthur did want to give them space, but at the same time he... almost wanted to make sure the two of them could still revert back to that tentative balance of father and son being put aside for student and Professor.

The silence pressed down on them, and finally Professor Malfoy tried breaking out of it. Very briefly, Arthur almost thought he saw a look of misplaced hurt scar the Professor's face before he spoke.

"I... will contact Mister Kirkland and Missus Malfoy in London. Professor Creevey, if you could..." Handle a house issue for the house professor, because things had become very complicated very quickly. Arthur hadn't really thought of Creevey and Malfoy as being proper friends, but that was honestly what it sounded like as the Defense teacher readily agreed and Arthur stepped out of the way so Professor Malfoy could sweep out of the room with a regretful look on his face- a look he avoided throwing back at his son.

As soon as Scorpius' father was out of the room and the door was shut behind him, Arthur stepped forward so he was properly next to and supporting his friend. Professor Creevey's patience, it seemed, were as plentiful as his smiles as he bade the two of them sit down at one of the long double desks. The professor pulled a chair around across the cold stones and sat down across from them for a chat.

"I don't know what happened-" Scorpius blurted out, eyes focused on the desk now and his cloak parted enough that Arthur could see the white-knuckle grip he had on his own trousers.

"But-" so he broke in on the confession to ease the burden, realizing too late when he saw the expectant look on Creevey's face that with Scorpius falling to pieces, Arthur Kirkland was far too
calm for all of this. "But we do know *something* happened."

"And that's alright," Professor Creevey answered, his smile a little softer than normal and really not as happy, curly brown hair piled high on his head over a large nose and kind eyes. He spread his large hands slowly in front of him, kept his voice mellow, and controlled the situation beautifully. "Just tell me what you know..."

So they did.
The ride back down to London started out very hectic, but by the end of it Feliciano was laughing.

"They missed the train." Arthur and Scorpius never showed up once throughout the entire five hour journey, meaning they'd either been abducted by Gryffindors or simply hadn't made it down to the platform in time to leave the school. "They actually missed the train!"

"It's not funny!" His mirth kept upsetting Ellie but Feliciano didn't think that was fair- it was the best kind of joke! "What if Arthur's brother gets really upset at him? He'll be so worried when the rest of us show up without him!"

"What about Scorpius, you're not worried about him too?" Charles asked, ignoring Feliciano who kicked off his shoes and swung his legs up so he could stretch and lay down across a compartment that was comfortably empty for once. "His mum’s a bit scary, really."

"Scorpius says Professor Malfoy always stays behind an extra few days for work reasons, I'm sure he'll be fine."

It was a happy, normal train ride beyond the upset of their friends missing the express. The further away from Hogwarts and a certain professor they went, the better Feliciano started to feel and the easier it was to throw himself back into happy conversation about Chirstmas break. There were no plans in his head for much travel, just the happy hope of settling into Venice or Rome for the entire two weeks and just conference calling anyone who needed him for work matters. A nice, domestic holiday was what he was looking forward to!

"Are you going to show your dad your gauntlet, Ellie?" His question made Gamp flush up a little bit and squirm on her side of the compartment, but then she surprised both him and Charles by shaking her head no.

"I- I left it at school actually."

"Huh?"

"How come? Professor Hagrid gave it to you!" Months ago, inside of hemp sack from Professor Hagrid after Care of Magical Creatures, there had been a hawker’s gauntlet for Ellie. It was made of thick leather scales that laced up under the wrist and was meant to protect her skin and clothes from owl claws. Her robes didn't look any better for it, but at least they weren't worse, and Feliciano hadn't seen anymore unfortunate cuts or scratches on her arms either.

"It's not mine though, I just borrow it really."

"He gave it to you." Charles pushed, rolling his eyes and turning his head like he was about to say something to Scorpius, who wasn't there.

"And you use it every day!" Just when Feliciano was starting to get worried that, maybe, there was a reason waiting on the platform for why Ellie didn't want to show her father the gift she'd been given by their professor. The young girl was shaking across the compartment from him until she let the real reason out in a rush:

"You don't need a gauntlet to raise swans!"

"Sw..."
"You train swans?"

"Well..." And then she flushed up her round cheeks and gave the black braid around the side of her head a firm tug, fingers clutching the end of it in one fist. She pulled her legs up where the jeans she was wearing under her winter robe kept her legs warm, crossing them and sitting like that on the seat as she bent over a little. "I just- I just feed them really. It's exactly the same as the owls and sometimes they parade around and form a neat little line. But they haven't got claws so there's no need to risk it getting even more damaged!"

Feliciano and Charles shared a look, and then both asked the same question:

"More damaged?"

And Ellie just squirmed for the rest of the ride.

Feliciano had a good idea of what to do when the Hogwarts Express finally slowed down and pulled into King's Cross station, shrugging off a question about whether or not Lovino would be there to pick him up for Christmas.

"Sometimes he comes, sometimes he doesn't; either way, I still get home in the end." And after three years of this Feliciano still knew how to completely misread the atmosphere and give the wrong answer to his young friends. The sorry look Ellie gave him and the glum way Charles muttered something about letters and presents over the holidays made him sorry for not choosing his words more carefully.

To his surprise, not only was Lovino waiting for him on the platform. To his extra surprise, so was someone he really hadn't expected to come all the way from home to, of all things, see him.

"You left the little bugger behind!" But before Feliciano could say anything to the woman whose arm was casually looped around his brother's elbow, he was stormed over by the loud, angry wall that was Scotland. England's brother was dressed up in a midnight blue suit that was just muggle enough in design and just magical enough with a gold pocket watch and shimmering star-pattern tie for him to get around just fine in both environments. "Merlin's pants! I know he's annoying but Christmas holidays aren't up for debate!"

There was a letter clutched in Scotland's hand and the way he tossed his arms up and shook his head showed he was exasperated, but not angry. He definitely wanted more of an explanation than whatever had beaten the train all the way to London.

"Ve~ We turned around and Arthur and Scorpius were both gone! It's not our fault."

"Well I ain't blamin' them, just you." Scotland corrected, nodding to Ellie and Charles to show they were safe. But England's brother was too light-hearted in this century to really mean what he was saying, because he broke into a grin and let the three of them enter the circle of adults. The number of parents had increased since September.

Mrs. Malfoy had a letter like Scotland's that she'd refolded and was holding in one gloved hand. Her fingers were playing with the crease as she seemed no less poised than normal, but rolled her eyes while saying her husband's name to a stout little witch Feliciano didn't recognize, but the young man next to her was familiar.

"Captain Higgs!" Charles' older brother was much taller than the woman he assumed had to be their mother, especially with the way she looked around at Feliciano's voice and saw Charles, immediately rushing up to him with a happy yell and kisses on his forehead and cheeks that he gasped and tried to
Mrs. Higgs had short, copper-red hair with a strawberry-patterned handkerchief tied around her head to keep the uneven locks back, a very pointy nose and full cheeks flushed in the cold December air. Her robe was brown suede and looked soft to the touch despite being worn along the hem and under both arms. Her red leather gloves had gold ribbon over the wrists and she pinched her son's cheeks hard while Feliciano stayed out of the way by immediately taking a position next to Lovino.

"Mister Vargas," Thomas Higgs gave a smile and a nod where he was dressed for the winter weather in a casual black ski-vest and hooded sweatshirt, a knit cap on his head and similar-looking red gloves on his hands that resembled a pair Charles avoided wearing at all costs in favour of his thinner, less effective school set. "Still avoiding quidditch, I hear?"

"Afraid so.

The large circle of Mrs. Higgs, Thomas Higgs, Mrs. Malfoy, Lovino, Scotland and Chiara, was rounded off with a scary-looking warlock in a black cloak and long green robe who obediently beckoned Ellie over to him with a hand. Mr. Gamp was a very tall man with a mean face, jaw jutting out and wrinkled lips turned down unpleasantly like Ellie's own permanent pout- just angrier. He had thin, almost oily black hair that matched hers in colour, but not in volume where his seemed almost fake, and even the black moustache painted over his upper lip didn't seem very real. His square face had hollow cheeks that didn't match her rounded ones either. Whatever her mother looked like, Eliza must have taken more after her as she practically vanished under the shadow of Mr. Gamp's cloak.

"Young Scorpius won't be coming home for Christmas then?" When Mr. Gamp spoke Eliza closed her eyes and seemed to lean into him a little bit, a reassuring sign that maybe the severe voice he used was a lot like the stern way Lovino usually spoke in public: just a front, not who he really was.

"Oh yes he will." Mrs. Malfoy answered plainly, but it was a casual kind of bluntness, not like she was trying to be mean. "If Professor Malfoy knows what's good for him, he'll be bringing my son home immediately, and with a better excuse than-" Unfolding her letter again, there was a very light snowfall beginning to dust down from the sky as she read: "Urgent business, terribly sorry. Extended apologies to the elder Mister Vargas and sending Scorpius along soon. Happy Christmas. Honestly, I don't know what's got into him."

"It's the apology I want to know about." It was the first thing Lovino said around all the chatter and Feliciano was quietly resigned to that being the topic he opened with. There was a quick flash of apprehension through his gut when it was brought up like that, but he tried to turn around with Lovino's warm hand on his shoulder and quietly tell his brother to wait until they were somewhere private.

Charles beat him.

"I bet it's about Huntington!" Feliciano's mouth was half-open and he had the breath to speak, but then just let it go in a long, slow hiss as he turned his head just enough to look straight at Charles. He didn't say anything, just stared, and he heard a sharper, louder hiss behind him when the name was said.

"No."

"Chichi-"

"I said no."
Chiara of Sicily was not who Feliciano had expected Lovino to bring with him to London. He'd been shocked when she'd appeared in Hogwarts on Ministry business, but he really couldn't have guessed that she and Lovino had patched things up enough between them already to willingly announce themselves as married in human company.

She wasn't dressed as extravagantly this time as the gown and robe from Hogwarts, but she also wasn't here to scare anyone either. The pearls from that visit were still in her hair along with a set of studded earrings which gave a creamy lustre under the curled bands of free black hair dripping down the sides of her head. A thick brown scarf was tucked into the black collar of a long, A-line winter coat that fell to her ankles where a hem of white lace was in danger of getting muddied in the rain and snow of London winter. The rest of her decorations were restricted to the mother of pearl buttons running in a straight line down the front of the jacket and the matching white lace on the cuffs of her sleeves.

He didn't want her to touch him, and it wasn't because he shared Charles' aversion to being kissed and cooed over in public: it was because she was Sicily and he was Venice and he didn't want her to touch him, snapping his head back when she reached and tried to get hold of his face with one hand. Absolutely not.

"What did that woman do?" Chiara didn't speak to him in Standard Italian, it would have been like admitting her own dialect wasn't good enough when she tried to confuse his ears with what was almost Lovino's way of speaking, but still distinct to her island. "I have no patience for that American brat, now answer me!"

"I cannot speak plainly." So Feliciano reached inside and pulled out his own dialect, the language closest to home and which resonated the most comfortably in his heart. "It will have to wait."

Lovino groaned and said nothing.

"This is no time for your schemes."

"This is not a scheme, it is fact: I cannot speak!"

"Your voice works just fine!"

"It's not my voice it's my to-ochk-!"

He hadn't meant to say that word. Over the last few days of term Feliciano had been trying to figure out which words specifically set off the curse and stopped him from speaking. So far he knew he couldn't think of Chiara and say sister or my brother's wife without setting it off. He wasn't allowed to mention art, paintings, Rome, galleries, curses or Professor Huntington by name. There was complexity in the spell that seemed to let it know the difference between saying the word 'curse' in Defense class versus anything at all referring what she'd done to him, and it was infuriating and painful when he got it wrong.

And it was the worst kind of pain, because it was such a minor affliction but it was in the worst place. The same sensation of a pushpin being forced into his fingertip or the sole of his foot would have made him squeak and continue on with whatever it was, but the undeniable feeling of a thin piece of metal stabbing him under the tongue gagged him every time. It was a sharp, sore piercing sensation like twisting or pulling a muscle in his jaw that grew until heat pooled over the surface of his tongue like blood, and it didn't go away until he took several breaths and gave up speaking all together.

He coughed twice this time and couldn't close his mouth to make them like little hiccups: it was the
first time the curse had caught him with his voice raised and a lung full of air. The first thing he heard was Charles spilling the whole story:

"There it is! Just like that!" He looked up slowly and Chiara's face was speechless, red lips parted but brown eyes swinging around to look for Lovino as they all listened to Charles. "He's been doing that since she came to Hogwarts and had a massive fight with Professor Huntington about something in Italian! As soon as class was over, she held Vargas back and did something Scorpius and Arthur said had him howling, but he hasn't said a word about it since!"

Mrs. Higgs had a ghastly look on her face, like someone had just tried to serve her cup of live tadpoles for tea. Beside his mother and Charlie, Thomas' eyes were two sizes too big in his skull. Mrs. Malfoy had both palms together and pressed over her lips, eyes jumping frantically around the circle. Mr. Gamp had something like black lightning charging in his eyes. Before Feliciano could get a better look at Eliza's father, he was left looking at his own brother face-to-face.

"Open your mouth," he said in English.

"I want to go home." Feliciano answered in their language.

"I know you do: now open your mouth." And just get it over with...

He knew what his brother was looking for and there was no more point in arguing. Dropping his jaw, he let his tongue out to show the bright blue and orange 'H' that had been painted across the back portion of his tongue. It carried no sensation on its own, he could eat and taste just fine, but not if he tried saying anything about the curse or why it was there. Because Lovino had no wand he closed his mouth a moment later, fully aware of how tricky it could be to remove a curse mark while standing in the falling snow of a slowly emptying train platform.

North and South shared a long, silent look after that, and Feliciano felt all the questions he was being hit with: was he alright? How long had this been going on? Why hadn't he put an end to it himself under his own power? How the hell had he allowed himself to be cursed in the first place?

It was very hard not to just step forward and take a hug from him instead of trying to wordlessly answer. He wanted the charm around his neck gone first, then he could deal with what was in his mouth later. He just needed to be himself again first, he didn't care about anything else until he had his proper identity back.

"I want to go home." He repeated, and this time he slipped from Standard Italian back into his own local breed of the same root language. He was suddenly so... so tired...

"Signora Malfoy," There was angry, frantic talk behind Lovino but Feliciano couldn't hear it, he just wanted to go to the nearest place where he could rip the ice-cold chain off from around his neck and just settle back into his own skin again. He barely noticed how close Chiara had been standing to him until she suddenly moved and left his side open to the cold wind of the London winter, shivering under his school cloak as Lovino straightened up and pulled him to his side for warmth. "I must take back what was said earlier. My husband and I will be returning to Italy with Feliciano promptly, and we will not be returning for the holidays."

"If at all!" Lovino shouted back over his shoulder, giving Feliciano the hug he wanted with one arm around his shoulders and the other brushing down his hair gently. It felt good to be held and his pride didn't care about classmates lingering in the crowd or curious parents listening to what their circle was hissing and clamouring about. He didn't care, he just wanted warmth.

"Sort out this mess, Kirkland, or you'll be starting the new year off on the wrong foot. Chiara,
amora, we're leaving. I've had enough of this damned magic."

And Feliciano just wanted to go home...

Centuries ago, Feliciano’s family had been much, much larger.

He hadn’t grown up with Lovino around, not after Grandpa Rome’s empire began to fade anyways, and his national name hadn’t been Romano then either: he’d been Napoli, or Naples. Veneziano, the one of Venice, had always been Veneziano.

But he’d grown up close to and often fighting with his brother Lombardy who was born in Milan. Lombardy and Veneziano had kept up a strong rivalry with Tuscany further east. Genoa had been a quiet child, Imperia was a rowdy sister, and the Papal States had looked kindly on Seborga and San Marino while also holding onto several other smaller brothers like Bologna and Parma.

Seborga was still around, he’d almost faded in the 20th century but was back now as a micronation in the 21st. San Marino had been content to stay on his hill and not get himself into any trouble, and after so many good and bad things during the early half of the 20th century, Papal States had taken back his old name as Vaticano and now kept a house in Rome again.

Now Veneziano alone was North Italy. The others, except for Seborga, San Marino and Vatican, were all long gone.

For Lovino things had been different, and they still were. He had problems Veneziano didn’t and he had chosen not to deal with the problems they did share in the same ways. When the Representation of South Italy had been the one to march ahead of Feliciano into Rome during their Unification wars, he’d taken not only the city’s name, but all of Papa Vatican’s wards into his own house.

Those wards had not included Sicily, but he’d protected his ex-wife just the same.

“After all,” he always said, whenever the topic of family came up between them, “we all know what you did to Sardinia.”

And Sardinia, more than Tuscany, Lombardy, Genoa or Imperia, was the reason why Chiara of Sicily would never forgive or trust Feliciano of Venice ever again.

It was a sad thing to wake up thinking of family. He barely knew where he was when he opened his eyes to dark windows and white lace curtains, cotton sheets and a feather pillow keeping him warm with a heavy velvet comforter pulled high over his shoulders. But he knew one thing for certain, even before he became aware of how heavy his long legs were or felt the scratch of stubble on his chin against the pillowcase when he moved, because he saw it there on the night-table:

Angelique’s cross was resting on the stained wood, heavy silver links coiled up and forming a bed for the studded silver cross-piece. The charm was off of him, and he was Italy.

He didn’t move from where he was curled up safely on his side, eyes flickering once with the cool sunlight and closing again with a deep, relaxed breath. He wasn’t tired enough to fall back to sleep, but was happy to just lay there and let body and spirit slowly realign at a sluggish, completely unbothered pace. He could wait all day to let the pieces of his mind filter back into place, like a computer scanning restored hardware to establish that his arms were the right length for his shoulders that felt wider, his neck a bit stiff from sleeping like a child when his body was back to the length
and breadth of adulthood.

He didn’t hear the door open, and later decided that it had been that way all along, but he did feel the bed jostle and heard the blankets get pulled back enough that one of his hands was exposed: his own fault for sleeping with it flung to the side across the middle of the bed, but it still wasn’t enough to bother him.

“Easy going, lad.” It was Scotland’s voice, unusually soft and almost musical with the rise and fall of his accented words. England made fun of it all the time, but Feliciano quite liked the sound of Scots. Maybe he’d just heard too many good things second-hand from France. “There. Just rest up and don’t give the rest of it a thought.”

England had missed the train yesterday.

He was also an adult now, not a little boy being carried and put to bed.

He was clutching the sheets with one hand so hard his knuckles were white, and when Feliciano finally noticed the shirt collar pressing against his own throat, he shifted a little bit in the bed and realized he was fully dressed. Shirt and trousers, just socks and a tie missing where he flexed his knees a little bit. It wasn’t fun thinking back, but he vaguely remembered a shower and Lovino’s hands wrestling the clothes onto his body before he’d been dropped onto the spinning bed to just sleep the charm off, just sleep and recharge after the nausea of reverting back to his proper form.

England’s hair was damp and his body was rigid, face twisting down into the pillow he had on his side of the bed. As he sat up, Feliciano understood exactly what was happening and felt sympathy.

“What about you, then?” Scotland didn’t raise his voice at all, but he walked around to Feliciano’s side of the bed so it was easier to talk. A heavy hand came down on his shoulder for a moment and Feliciano stretched his back, rubbing his neck with one hand and shrugging a little at the question. “I just got back from Hogwarts with Arthur, stick out your tongue.”

He blew out a bit of a sigh, but didn’t complain because he didn’t want to upset England. For the first little while, even speaking voices could get the room spinning. He opened his mouth as instructed.

Scotland looked tired. There were black bags under his blue eyes and his red beard had hairs going here and there across his cheeks where he hadn’t had a chance to groom properly. He ran one hand back through his hair and it explained the awkward wave to it, his other hand touching Feliciano’s chin so he could get a better look at the curse mark still resting in his mouth, then let him pull his tongue back in.

“Damn it all.” Scotland uttered. “I met with Professor Malfoy and let me tell you, I haven’t seen that man so furious since the Second Wizarding War.”

“McGonagall?” Feliciano asked.

“Beside herself twice over.” Good news then, maybe when they went back in January there wouldn’t be a History teacher anymore. “Don’t go getting ahead of yourself. She signed a contract with the school so they aren’t going to put her out with the trash, but keep your windows open because the owls will be coming any day now with the apologies.”

England groaned something that sounded like a plea for silence, and Feliciano felt enough strength and sympathy to slowly stand up and leave him be. He felt a chill as he left the warm bed, pleased to see slippers on the floor and accepting a borrowed red housecoat that Scotland fetched off a chair in
the corner of the room. Yawning into the back of his hand as he stood up, he gestured with the other for Scotland to lead him out of the room so they could talk in private and let England rest. He deserved it after what they’d both been through.

“I wanna make some changes to those charms, Vargas.”

“Later,” he answered, sluggishly pulling the housecoat closed and looping the belt around itself to keep it shut. “Tell me the news.”

They moved into the hallway and Feliciano recognized the upper level of England’s London townhouse, stopping briefly and turning around to realize that he’d been sleeping in England’s bed, not the spare-room. Scratching the back of his head, he didn’t want to change subjects but was curious about the decision. Scotland caught on and answered quickly:

“Lack of space. I gave up the spare room to your brother and sister when they arrived Wednesday, putting me on the damned couch downstairs. We were going to pack up to Arthur’s house in Kent for the Holidays until that scene on the platform yesterday.”

“I don’t know where that is- is it nice?” Feliciano surprised himself for being interested, the call of home still resonating in his gut, but it wasn’t choking the life out of him anymore.

“It’s very English.” Was how Scotland answered the question, a cheeky little grin as he scrunched his nose and gave a little shiver. “Right, now about the American…”

Scotland led him downstairs where the strong smell of cinnamon and vanilla greeted them, England’s sitting room dominated by a modest evergreen tree in the corner decorated with silver ribbons and polished red glass balls, gold bells and an ornate five-point star resting on top.

“These are from America.” Scotland went straight to the low coffee table where a holiday quilt sporting reindeer and dancing Santas was running down the middle, scooping up a large manila envelope that had the ragged edges of parchment sheets sticking out of it. “And by America I should say the American Ministry of Magic, not Alfred himself, since I think the only thing that big baby did was stamp the request papers and then pay the postage to get it over here. He’s worse than Germany, that boy.”

“At least he tries.” Feliciano took the heavy stack when it was offered to him, opening the stressed flap of the office folder and seeing the last face he wanted grinning cheerfully up from the status portfolio in front of him. He snapped it shut and honestly hoped the black and white photo of Professor Huntington jumped and had to rub her nose for it.

The room was warm with holiday spirit, something Feliciano was happy for when he heard a shot of laughter from the kitchen and followed Scotland across the den to the dining room, which was only a counter away from England’s open-plan kitchen area. He didn’t cook very much, so the limited counter space was probably just fine for him.

“Don’t tell me you two are breakin’ things.” Scotland scolded, and Feliciano thought the wall was very interesting as Chiara turned around from where she had flour up to her elbows and a streak of it across her nose now from where Lovino had either touched her with it or she’d done it to herself.

“Baking, not breaking,” she corrected, her words in English carrying a stronger accent than what Feliciano and Lovino were used to giving, but that was probably because she didn’t make a habit of speaking English very often. “And don’t blame me, this idiot’s the one who can’t make coffee.”

“I can so make coffee it’s that bastard upstairs who doesn’t have a coffee pot.”
Yesterday, Lovino and Chiara had worn matching outfits of black to play up their apparent youth with their obvious status to move as a unit instead of two stressful parts. It meant they were getting along better now than they had in almost five decades because it was one thing to parade around in public together, but something else for Chiara to go wearing his brother’s t-shirt in England’s kitchen while they both worked on making breakfast for the group.

And yes, Feliciano knew that red and white shirt with that industrial crest on the sleeve, and Chiara was wearing it comfortably with her hair carelessly bound up behind her head in a long pony-tail, simple grey sweatpants and slippers keeping her warm on the tile floor.

Lovino had also given up the esteemed warlock look he’d been going for on the Platform, a white Olympic Team Italia sweatshirt and hood making him look almost hung-over as he carried a steaming pot over to the sink and dumped a load of burnt coffee down the drain. Without even bothering to rinse or wash it out, his brother let the handle go and turned around, ignoring Scotland and his wife to come straight at Feliciano.

He was actually very happy to have a firm hand grab him behind the neck and their foreheads knock together. It hurt a little bit, but he grinned and freed one hand from the stack of papers he was holding and grabbed his brother’s shoulder hard. Scotland’s hand was there to take the stack completely and Feliciano was free to pull and be pulled by his brother into a full, proper, rib-cracking hug.

“You moron,” Lovino grumbled, arms tight around his chest and weight shifting like they were going to swing each other around. “I leave you alone for three months, turn around and you let some stuffy American girl put a curse on you.”

“Yeah, well you-” It was good to bicker a little bit, it was better to do it with his eyes closed and hands holding on tight to the back of Lovino’s sweatshirt, just warm and close with North and South Italy relaxing with the sensation of being reunited. It just felt better to have him back again. “I go away for a few months, come back and find you married!”

“I missed the part where I left the Republic, Veneziano.” Now he just had to tell himself to be happy to hear Sicily’s voice where she was still at the counter kneading her bread. “Care to refresh my memory?”

“Don’t start- do not start.” Lovino stopped Feliciano from answering by giving him a kiss on the forehead and then shoving him around the far side of the counter to take a seat at the bar-style stools England had on the dining-room side of the divide. “For today and for Christmas you two are not going to fight. I don’t give a shit about tomorrow or all the other days, but today and Christmas, I swear to God, you are going to get along.”

“Make me.” Chiara challenged, catching Feliciano with the same words in his own mouth, which he promptly swallowed because he refused to be caught mimicking her. He did watch her turn around and fetch a greased pan from the counter next to him though, her bread obviously having already risen earlier as she slid it in a heavy lump into the tin square and then opened England’s oven to place it inside. Not as good as a wood-burning oven back home, but Feliciano was not going to argue with fresh bread and what smelled like herbs rolled into the dough. “Lovino: coffee.”

“Tell your brother he’s getting a coffee-pot for Christmas.” Lovino hissed the words at Scotland and then went back to the sink to wash out the pot and start again on their late pick-me-up. Glancing at the clock on the wall, Feliciano noticed now that it was past ten in the morning, meaning he wasn’t the only one who’d either slept late or been out and about too early to bother making breakfast.

“Professor Alice Huntington is in the shit, since I know that’s what you all wanted to hear.”
Scotland’s announcement came out of nowhere, but Feliciano was happy to hear it and Lovino gave a sharp little sound in the back of his throat. Chiara, who was rinsing the flour off her skin at the sink, was the first one to turn around and actually speak.

“And her investigation?” Feliciano had almost forgotten about that, but before he could speak he felt a tell-tale pain in the back of his mouth that made him stop, sit there and scowl.

“Stalled for the time being, not that she’s made any progress anyways. Only two paintings have been attacked this year, one by an Irish painter and the other was Polish.”

“And yet she still demands Italian paintings to replace them- unbelievable!” Chiara’s disgust was refreshing because Feliciano agreed, but he opened his mouth with a suggestion and- aaah…

“Was she actually brought to the school to help stop the vandal?” Lovino asked the question instead of Feliciano, and he didn’t word it the way North Italy wanted to. The smell of fresh coffee grinds and hot water was starting to filter through the air from the heating pot in front of him, which was doing wonders to wake Feliciano up in more than just the physical sit-up-straight sense. He hadn’t had coffee in months… “Her file from America wasn’t clear, I figure that would be on the British side.”

“I haven’t a damned clue.” Scotland answered. “I just know that on the academic side she’s fully qualified to teach Muggle History, nevermind the magic perspective. She did her schooling in Delaware, went to your lots house for a few years, and then came back and enrolled in a muggle university instead.” Interesting…

“So, why this obsession with us?” Lovino asked, his wife snaking her arms around him from behind and looking at the steaming but not ready coffee. “What did you find?”

“Mmm, should I tell you?”

“Yes?” Feliciano bit his tongue so he couldn’t add to Lovino’s answer. Chiara let go of him and turned around to face him and Scotland again.

“She courted several of Veneziano’s houses, but never joined one.” Oh, well that was a good way to become very unpopular in his magical territories. “Then, she enrolled at L’Accademia di Ercolano in Naples.” This got Lovino’s head to turn a little bit, but he didn’t let the coffee burn. “And after that, she was expelled.” Oh.

“Really?” Scotland asked, then gave a short laugh.

“Why?” Feliciano asked, and his sister shrugged.

“If I want details, I have to make the request and then follow up with it. I can’t just show up and walk inside” Oh, and that was a lot of work. Feliciano meant that sentiment honestly, magical bureaucracy did not move quickly, and there were a lot of formalities tied up in the south’s policies. “As for you,” she gestured to Feliciano. “Your problems seem to be your own. What did she say, Scotland?”

“As far as she says,” Their host started, arms crossed. “It’s an incident of pride. She stood there in that room and told Malfoy he was getting his knickers in a knot over a spell that only hurts because it proves this lout can’t keep a secret.” Feliciano resented that and watched Scotland roll his eyes slowly, pawing at the same dark blue suit jacket he’d been wearing yesterday on the platform looking for something.

“Where did I-? Ah, here it is.” A ripped up square of parchment unfolded between Scotland’s thick
fingers, and he cleared his throat gruffly before quoting: “If he was really such a good little boy then
he’d know better than to talk about other people’s business, all I did was install a fail-safe, and
obviously it’s working.”

“Bullshit.” Finally a word he could grunt through the cramp building in his mouth, and it got Lovino
to look over his shoulder at him and Chiara untwisted her mouth from the bitter line it had settled in.
His mouth was still open but he felt that sharp narrow pin jam itself straight into the flesh under his
tongue and grunted low in his own chest before letting the words back up and collapse in his throat.

“It’s affecting you again, isn’t it?” He didn’t like having Sicily notice the problem first, but her
comment made Scotland’s head snap around to look at him and Feliciano just folded his arms on the
counter. He rested his weight forward and shrugged his shoulders. “Are you seriously just going to
sit there with it on?”

“I’m forbidden from using magic outside of school.” Feliciano answered, confused by his own
evasiveness when he didn’t just start begging for one of them to pull out a wand and help him get rid
of the mark in his mouth. He still wanted coffee, to shave and shower and just be taken seriously as
an adult again. Being able to talk about work could wait until he’d had a few hours of just being at
ea ease with himself, couldn’t it? “We can deal with it later.”

“Why not right now?” Lovino asked, looking over his shoulder where he was stirring the coffee
briskly over the heat, the smell of it rising and driving him insane: wasn’t it ready yet?

“Because you don’t have a wand,” Feliciano answered, nodding to his brother, then his sister-in-law:
“She doesn’t like me,” Chiara huffed. “And he’s tired.” Scotland just shrugged, apparently happy to
agree with his logic and let the issue rest. “I can wait for Arthur to recover. As long as we aren’t
talking about any of that then I’m fine.”

“Any of that? Try being a bit more specific.” Chiara scolded, and he rolled his eyes.

“Any-” And then he started coughing, swearing at himself between gasps for walking into the trap.

“I changed my mind; I think I like this woman very much.” Damn her...
Christmas in Kent

Arthur woke up to the sound of yelling, and he was quite unhappy about it.

He felt terribly hung-over, something which lacked explanation because he had certainly not been drinking, but there he lay with a dry mouth full of gunk, a pounding headache, and a sore, aching body that did not want to put up with whatever was happening downstairs.

He was briefly terrified by the idea that it might have been the rest of his brothers: Wales and North Ireland come along with Scotland to torment him for Christmas. The eldest one he felt he could tolerate better than he had before this entire Hogwarts experience had begun, but the other two were guaranteed to drive him mad.

But the first full words he heard weren’t English, Welsh, Cornish, Scottish, Irish, or any other dialect or intonation found on their islands.

It was Italian, and it was saying:

“Be careful! You’ll hurt him!”

“Says the one without a wand!”

“No more! Neither of you come near me again! I quit!”

So, Arthur, embodiment of England, dragged the comfortably warm quilt and sheets of his own bed off his aching, adult body, made his feet find the cold carpet of his private bedroom, and heaved his ancient shoulders off the soft mattress that came crying for him to lay back down. He stood up, barely, rubbed one hand against the pale blonde scruff growing in down his cheeks and chin, shuffled to his bedroom door, and:

“If you don’t shut up! Then you can bugger off and get out of my house!”

With the bang of his own bedroom door slamming shut, he then turned around and promptly went back to bed.

He was in much higher spirits the next time he woke up, because his body had managed its affairs and the awful sensation of being six days drunk and paying for it on a Monday had passed. He also woke up to a softly steaming cup of fresh tea being left on his bedside table, a woman’s voice softly asking if he was quite alright after sleeping for so long, and in all was far more open to the idea of letting other nations hide away in his home for a few days.

Arthur always had liked Sicily. She had splendid weather and a very vibrant, boisterous air about her. She was also to his knowledge the last Italian sister left in the house and had adopted quite the maternal side for nations she was fond of. Less so for people who angered her, but Arthur really wasn’t surprised why she and Romano had such a flamboyant relationship. One century they were lovers, the next she was threatening separation, a few decades later they would arrive separately to the same parties and meetings, only to leave together arm-in-arm or spend an entire evening sitting at the same table making snarky comments about the rest of the guests.

It was a shame Sardinia had been killed at the end of the Italian wars, Arthur quite missed the charm of the Italian sisters going around together for visits to various courts. Sardinia had been the Prussia of Italy for a blazing century or two before her end.
He’d have to ask North Italy about it sometime… or not, depending on how candid Arthur felt like being.

“Where is Kent, by the way?” but back to Sicily, who was amused and gently smiling as Arthur pulled himself out of bed with late afternoon sunlight fading through the window. He was enough of a gentleman not to go yawning brightly in front of her, decent enough in a comfortable grey t-shirt and black sweatpants despite the need for a shave.

“Oh, not far at all from London,” he answered.

“Unless you plan on honestly kicking us out tonight, this house is too small for the five of us.”

Arthur understood and wasn’t affronted by the suggestion that they move from his city home to his country one. Kent wasn’t quite the rolling pasture and gentle rains of previous centuries, but a modest property with a very old house on a hill was where Arthur liked to escape for a weekend at least once a month.

The Hogwarts Express had arrived on Saturday, Arthur had been brought home on Sunday, and the five nations left London the next morning on Monday after a very cramped night with everyone in the house outright claiming the only two beds in the townhouse. Sicily and Romano won one bed because Sicily was simply too frightening to argue with about such things and Arthur was a gentleman anyways. Arthur won the other bed because it was his damned bed.

The house in Kent was… significantly older than the plumbing or electricity implied. Arthur hadn’t quite forgiven Germany for bombing the two-story relic during the Blitz, but as soon as his economy had turned around a few decades after the war it had been a slow, forty-year effort to rebuild the house on a bureaucrat’s pay. What had been seven bedrooms, two drawing rooms, a set of servant’s quarters, a hall, a dining room, and a small library was now updated and styled after the decades after the war, not the empire from before it.

Five bedrooms, much larger than their predecessors, a modern kitchen, a similar hall, only one drawing room, a games room with billiards, darts and a bar, and other house-ish things all done in proper English style was what the five of them had to… first of all clean because Arthur hadn’t been at home for three years now, then restore power to by flicking a few breakers and making sure the rest of the utilities were still in order.

In the simplest of terms, Monday was just a day of laundry, grocery-shopping, dusting, and arguing about how to get the damned tree into the damned house until in the middle of pulling and pushing and flustering about Scotland demanded to know why he couldn’t just magic the awful thing inside.

Arthur wasn’t even sure when the Italians had decided to stay for Christmas, but considering Italy didn’t utter a word of English for the next three days of cooking, reading, relaxing, and general holiday merrymaking, apparently the language filled a void for him.

Arthur’s house was modern, but the way the nations enjoyed themselves was actually rather old fashioned. The only television was in his office on the first floor and for whatever reason they kept it on with the door open and volume on high: the blare of Christmas television specials competing with the voice crackling and whining through from the drawing room’s radio. The piano was dusted off after three days and Christmas sweets were baked up and served beside warm sherry and a variety of Italian breads and sweets that South Italy had the large hand in preparing.

Business was attended to as well. Italy was in contact with several ministers and absorbed in his phone almost as deeply as Arthur was when he basked in the electronic glow of his computer for what felt like the first time in years. He also wasn’t consulted directly when Germany was invited to
come up and join them, but the younger nation declined because he was spending the pre-Christmas
week with Austria.

Arthur was proactive and actually called America and Canada, and somehow wound up conference
calling almost half of the Commonwealth in a long and exhausting afternoon of chatter and cheer. He
hadn’t known how much he’d needed that contact, but he was happier for it.

But he and Italy were horrified, together, when on the day of Christmas Eve an owl showed up at the
kitchen window through the snowfall.

“It’s from the Malfoys?” It was a great big white owl, stately and a little intimidating with bright
green eyes and shades of grey along its feathers. It was in fact a great big attention suck of course,
because it crooned several times to Scotland before it was finally fed a few pieces of holiday ham
and departed.

A big bird was necessary for what it left behind, which was four well-wrapped wizarding packages.
One for Arthur, one for Italy, and one for the Kirkland and Vargas families each. The ones for the
Italians were addressed to their house in Rome, but owls were smart creatures.

Scotland tried to laugh it off and tell them they couldn’t open their gifts until Christmas morning, but
Arthur’s sweaty palms and Italy’s petrified expression had the same root cause.

They’d forgot.

Gamp’s owl arrived later that evening with a letter wishing Feliciano a happy Christmas and hoping
he wasn’t in any trouble for having been cursed. Scorpius’ letter for Feliciano was quite long, and
Arthur had a very sorry apology and an earnest thanks for standing next to him while snitching on a
professor to his father and Creevey.

“Oh my God-” But the nations were in a panic by the time the Higgs’ family owl arrived looking
sleepy and hungry with two gifts wrapped in gold paper.

“Okay- okay we can handle this.”

“Scorpius is easy but what does Charlie want?”

“Just get him broom polish.”

“What kind of friend gives a friend broom polish, Arthur?”

“I don’t know!”

“Chocolates?”

“For Christmas?”

When, oh when, had this entire ruse become so difficult?

On Christmas Eve they had to hurry and they had to make up their minds as fast as they could: were
they going to get gifts for their human friends or not?

“Don’t you dare ask me to go, it’s your own bloody fault for forgetting!”
Scotland was mean and refused to help them by going into Diagon Alley with a frantic list of things to look for and try to buy with England and Feliciano’s money. If any of the Italians were seen after saying they were going home for Christmas then it would be a really awkward and rude thing to explain, but in the end Feliciano and England had to pull on a set of adult wizarding robes and get back into London as fast as magically possible before the shops could close.

The snowfall was heavy for London weather, broken up by angry dumps of rain that sent the cold straight through Feliciano’s robe and the jacket he was wearing underneath the emerald green from home. He knew it was Lovino’s robe, but he didn’t care: he got it soaking wet and went shivering down the colourful Christmas streets of Diagon Alley half a pace behind England.

They’d agreed, under any and all circumstances, to call him Fabrizio instead of Feliciano if there was any reason to give him a name at all. Arthur was a common English name, Feliciano was far from run of the mill Italian. He used the other name from time to time anyways to keep paperwork sorted in Rome when birth and death dates conflicted with the system or with particular clerks and officials, but he didn’t care about dealing with multiple identities tonight.

England put down the money for a Broom Service kit for Scorpius while Feliciano fled across the street to the loud, noisy interior of the Weasley Wheezes Joke Shop and found a set of whizz-bang fireworks that were probably going to get in Charlie in a lot of trouble, but the box of chocolates he picked up for Mr. and Mrs. Higgs would hopefully help ease the blow. He didn’t know what Arthur got for Higgs, but in a potion-supplies shop he saw a book about fabulous concoctions and how to brew them: things like making your eyebrows go huge or flavour draughts that made bitter vegetables taste like candy and cinnamon. Scorpius always managed to avoid getting into trouble with Slughorn for taking extra potions ingredients and playing around with them in the latter half of slow lessons, so maybe this would spice things up for him.

“She has an owl already and she trains swans.” They met up in the cold winter night again and ran straight to the wizard’s equivalent of a post office to pay for four owls and send the boys’ presents off as fast as possible, walking in step with each other as the horror slowly set in about how empty the alley was beginning to look. “What the devil do we get Gamp, bird seed?”

What did thirteen-year-old boys give thirteen-year-old girls without embarrassing each other?

“I’m sorry, my friend, but you’re on your own now.” Feliciano had meant to say something else, but glancing past Arthur’s shoulder gave him a wonderful idea that he refused to share. He walked right past the other nation as the snow turned back into rain over their heads, ducked into a dark shop full of leather pieces and display weapons, and made a very fast, pleading purchase with the stubborn witch inside who wanted to close up shop and go home for Christmas dinner.

“What on earth did you find in there?” England was standing in the beating rain under a muggle umbrella when he came back, blonde hair aglow in the light of the Weasley shop that was shutting down for Christmas Eve. Feliciano just grinned and hurried to join him under the cover, one gloved hand raised with the parcel wrapped in brown paper to keep it safe.

“Something for my niece.”

“You haven’t got a niece!”

No, but he did have time to pen a short letter in the same owl station, apologizing for the lack of pretty paper or gift for the rest of her family, but insisting that the package was from Feliciano as well as his older ‘cousin’ Fabrizio, who thought she had a wonderful talent and would be very happy to hear more about her owls and her swans and wanted to know if the story about the Gnome Queen was true or if Feliciano was just lying.
So, Feliciano sent Eliza a brand-new hawking gauntlet for Christmas, while England sulked and got her candy.

Italy, Romano, and Sicily left the day after Christmas, which itself was a happy day of music, excellent food, and more phone-calls to and from around the world to keep contact with one another and make New Years plans. After a hectic Christmas Eve, Arthur was able to fully relax with just himself and Scotland alone in the house in Kent, and enjoyed the rest of a quiet Christmas Vacation with minimal fuss or interruption.

At least that was what he did when Scotland wasn’t brewing foul potions on his kitchen stove and forcing Arthur to drink them.

“You’re taking this both much too seriously and far too personally,” was all the opposition Arthur could raise before a violently purple solution was poured into one of his nice china cups and given to him with instructions to drink quickly. “It’s fine, Dan.”

“You passed out for twelve damn hours after taking the charm off for Christmas: *it is not fine.*” Arthur had never resented any accessory so much as he did that green wrist-watch. Scotland kept it in one tight fist and made Arthur take up and hold it for several minutes after trying each stomach-settling, head-righting draught. For all the effort though he still got sick and he still got dizzy, and Arthur still wound up on his knees with his eyes cross and his ear-drums rattling. Scotland never expected him to hold it for more than those few awful minutes before letting him release the charm and go back to normal, but there was nothing quite like having his favourite television programs completely spoiled by doubling over sick in the middle of them.

By the time New Years and a wonderful party in Toronto came calling, Arthur was able to escape for drinking and dancing and rough-housing in his former colony’s largest city. He groggily bade Canada a happy farewell before rushing back to London a day later, jet-lagged and hung-over, to get ready for his return to Hogwarts.

Scotland got him again that morning with something that looked and smelled suspiciously like his favourite breakfast tea, but tasted like grape jam smeared on a dirty old bike tire.

“I *despise* you.” It was hardly the sort of thing Arthur wanted to deal with only four short hours before Italy was expected to arrive in Heathrow, but as he gulped the hot solution down and was handed his wrist-watch. Scotland kept it in one tight fist and made Arthur take up and hold it for several minutes after trying each stomach-settling, head-righting draught. Arthur’s head started spinning but his stomach, for once, blessedly remained in place. His legs were too short and his shoulders were spindly and small inside the white shirt he’d been wearing comfortably a few minutes earlier, but with a few deep breaths and a lot more scowling from Scotland, he deemed this potion the greatest success so far.

“I’ll keep working on it.”

“Honestly, Scot, I almost prefer the sick feeling to that awful taste.”

“And I don’t damned well care what you prefer, it’s driving me mad and I ain’t gonna put it down until I have a solution.”

Italy’s plane landed right on time and Arthur was there in his thirteen-and-a-half year-old glory to help pick him up from the airport. Arthur also watched him deal with the awful taste of the same potion an hour later in the safety of England’s sitting room before Scotland gave him back the silver cross responsible for entirely too much strife.
The red light Italy gave off from the crown of his auburn head and off his shrinking, shortening body as the spell took effect was exactly the same as before, but after groaning about the disgusting taste in his mouth and the dizzy feeling that meant he needed to sit down, he settled much easier into the restrictive form, and the three of them finally remembered, wands brandished, to fix the poor chap’s height so that Feliciano Vargas, although still the shortest member of their year, was finally taller than Alexandra Finnick: Margaret Finnick’s first year sister.

“Right then, open your mouth.” Trunks packed, stomachs settled, and enough Christmas homework already complete that they simply weren’t bothered by the idea of what was left to do on the train, and Arthur paused with his shrunken coat half-buttoned up when Scotland seemed to remember something and gave Italy the direct order. The other nation blinked twice, gave an awkward shuffle with his little feet, then spoke.

“Why...? Chiara already dealt with the curse mark.”

“I know she did, but unless you want it to go happening again, I suggest you open up, Vargas.”

“It won’t.”

The severe way Italy made that statement caused a stall in the discussion, and Arthur finished doing his buttons and then stood there with his school scarf in one hand, unwilling to put it on in the warm house as he stood there by the door and watched them. Scotland had both brows hiked up across his forehead, but was only startled, not upset.

“You sound confident.”

“I was only still wearing it on the platform because I waited too long.” now this was an admission Arthur wanted to hear, because he had been curious about Italy’s complacency with the spell. “You know, I wanted to see how long it would take to wear off on its own. A day or two, maybe a week, and then by the time we got on the train I was curious about whether distance would break it instead!” And then by the time they’d arrived in London proper, it had been too late for Italy to pull out his wand and perform the spell himself without causing a fuss between ministries about underage magic.

“So you want a counter-charm or not then?”

“I think I can handle it.” Italy gave such a brilliant, charming smile with his white teeth flashing and sun-kissed cheeks pulled back, the faint bronze of the stubble he’d worn after the flight a memory now with soft cheeks too round for his normal appearance to justify.

“Now you listen well, Vargas.” Scotland wasn’t fooled by Italy’s light-heartedness, but at least when he came down on him he did it in that fast-talking manner of his instead of actually raising his voice and getting upset. “Hogwarts had a hell of a time back in the Nineties keeping its Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers-”

“But I like Professor Creevey!”

“Creevey is quite good, Scot.”

“Shut up, both of ya! I’m just saying don’t go giving the History of Magic position the same bad wrap!”

Despite the violent warning and the serious subject matter, Arthur actually found himself in higher spirits as Scotland growled under his breath for the entire taxi ride to King’s Cross, which was when Arthur also remembered to ask a different question of Italy.
“What sort of apologies did you get, by the way?” With two children and a cat-carrier for Gino in the backseat it was rather cramped, but Scotland was sitting up front next to the driver and both boys’ trunks were crammed in the boot with a strap to keep the lid from flying open as they drove. The weather was no less miserable now than it had been on Christmas Eve, but at least they were nice and dry inside the car.

“One from McGonagall on behalf of the school, but it’s not really the same thing.” McGonagall knew who they were and why they were there, so there was no telling what sorts of things she’d seeded into her words to him. If Arthur could guess, he might even suggest that the Headmistress thought Italy had let himself remain under the charm’s effects for so long just to embarrass the school… And maybe he had. “Another one from Professor Malfoy, but it was for Lovino actually not me. Creevey wrote me too asking me not to be mad at you and Scorpius for telling on another teacher.”

“And are you mad at us?” Arthur teased, feeling glib as Italy rolled his eyes and then gave an elaborate shrug, pretending that maybe he was still angry for about three seconds before he grinned at his own joke and shook his head. “Good, you’d give Scorpius a fright if you were.”

“Should I show up frowning?” Italy asked and then drew his brows down in a miserable way, positively petulant until Arthur laughed over a bump in the road and it made the other nation stop trying.

“That’s about how long you’d be able to hold it for him too.”

“Who else contacted you, Vargas?” Scotland’s question from the front seat made their chatter settle for a moment, and Arthur rather wished it hadn’t happened like that. “The Headmistress and two professors, who else?”

Italy didn’t answer, he just glanced out the window with one hand curled up under his chin, watching the grey rain as London sped by and they hit the motorway running fast towards the station. Arthur’s good cheer waned.

“Vargas?”

“Three letters is pretty good, don’t you think? It was really nice of Creevey to write to me.”

And that, more than their eventual arrival at the train station and the fuss of unloading the taxi without getting drenched in the rain, put a definite end to any talk of Professor Huntington.

Transferring from the familiar crowds of King’s Cross Station to Platform 9 ¾s was really very simple despite the massive holiday crowds added to the post-holiday commuters who just wanted the tourists to leave London and never come back. The fuss and traffic were all the better to help two boys and a grown man vanish through a brick column with none the wiser.

The rolling white steam, jaunty high whistle, and sleek red body of the Hogwarts Express were all exactly as Arthur had come to expect over the last three years, which made it all the more jarring when the magnificent sight was abruptly cut off by a curtain of sweeping black.

“Mister Kirkland.” And such a low voice, unexpectedly deep like instead of being lodged in the speaker’s throat it was coming so far down as to be heard in the small of his back. Small however was not the word for the Wizard who came to completely dominate Arthur’s field of vision, but when he looked straight up at a square jaw with black eyes and a glossy beard, his attention was ripped back down by movement just outside the sweeping fall of the wizard’s black cloak. There, hovering over the green and silver stripes of her Slytherin house scarf, was the round and ghostly
pale face of Eliza Gamp.

Her father, Arthur decided, was downright terrifying even as he offered what was meant to be a friendly handshake to Scotland, which was accepted in a way that suggested they’d met at least once before now.

“Mister Gamp, excellent to see you again, sir. Pleasant holidays all around?”

“Quite.” Well that was far from a convincing answer, but Arthur glanced back at Ellie again and saw her biting her thin lips the way she sometimes did when trying not to smile, so at least if she wasn’t scared then he had no reason to be so wary. “Is Mister Vargas not with you today?”

“I’m afraid the elder bother only comes to London to pick up the rug-rat. Somehow I always get stuck playing post man to send them off.” The low sound Mr. Gamp made in his throat didn’t sound like a laugh or an amused huff, it just sounded foul tempered and annoyed. “Was there something you were needing to discuss with him? He’s not too hard to summon.”

“Nothing that requires that kind of force, not yet at least.” Not yet? Arthur almost asked the question himself until he remembered that he was much too short and not nearly the right status to go speaking up. Mr. Gamp also, too his damned credit, seemed to remember that there were three teenagers hovering at his shoulders and eagerly listening.

“I tell you what, how about you and I get a spot of tea or a pint at the Leaky Cauldron tonight and hash it out then? But for now: you two eggheads go get your bags on that train or so help me I’ll stuff you in with the rest of the luggage.”

It brought an end to their eavesdropping as Arthur was given a good shove at the shoulder to make him walk away, Italy cheerfully calling for Ellie to join them and help find a seat on the train. Eliza Gamp was truly braver than either of them had given her credit for, because she publicly wrapped her arms around the stern, angry-looking warlock who was standing there seemingly intent on staring down the Scottish Nation, then happily came trotting after them. Arthur gave a wave back and Italy wasn’t expected to look like he’d miss Scotland either way, so the three of them left the ‘adults’ to their business.

“Thank you- thank you so much for the present, Feliciano!” Ellie even had the spunk to conquer her jitters and, unprompted, bounced on her toes as they wandered the narrow hall of the train and started speaking. “I love it, I absolutely do, and so does Heffin!”

“Oi!”

Charlie whipped open a compartment door behind them and shouted, getting the three of them to turn around and hurry into the little space. The search for the rest of their friends complete as Arthur stepped inside and saw Scorpius curled up on one of the seats by the window, nose deep in the first book he’d ever seen the boy look legitimately interested in. ‘Convoluted Concoctions’? That definitely wasn’t on the reading list.

Since when was Italy so much better at pleasing English children than England himself?

“You got me in a load of trouble, Vargas, I oughta sock you one.”

“You set them off inside, didn’t you?” Set what off? Wait- what were they talking about?
“Not on purpose!” Charlie dropped his chin to his throat and scowled, but he had the most mischievous little grin pulling at his narrow mouth that Arthur rolled his eyes and then closed them hard, telling himself not to try imagining what horrible damage Italy’s gift had caused the Higgs Household. Clearly he hadn’t been barred from ever speaking to them again, but Arthur honestly wondered how close a call that had been.

“I’m gonna make this one, by Merlin I am.” Scorpius didn’t say hello so much as he sat up a little so Ellie could sit where his feet had been a minute before. He turned the big green and purple book around so the rest could see what he was reading. “And pour it in the Hippogriff water trough.”

“Scorpius Malfoy don’t you dare!” Arthur skimmed a list of curious ingredients which included a few dried eucalyptus leaves and a lock of drop-bear fur, then let his eyes jump up to the description of a nightmare solution guaranteed to haunt and terrorize the drinker. He understood Eliza’s reaction. “That only happened because Professor Hagrid was terse with you during the lecture, Hippogriffs are very sensitive to their handler’s emotions!”

“If Kirkland and Vargas can get out of Divination because Professor Firenze hates them then I should be able to quit Magical Creatures because every beast in that course has it out for me!” Scorpius shut the book tight after that and gave Ellie such a peevish look, nose scrunched up and blonde brows pulled down over his narrow grey eyes. He looked extremely foul pulling a face like that, and Arthur didn’t understand why he heard Charlie laughing a little before breaking into the discussion.

“How are you so good in that class?” Arthur folded his arms with a huff and fell back against his side of the compartment, absently looking around to see if Scorpius had brought along his chessboard with that big book, but sadly he had not. Italy was next to him and pulled his feet up on the seat to sit cross-legged, something that took up entirely too much space on the couch so Arthur, graciously, shoved him to the floor.

“You’re so mean to me.”

“Go make new friends then.”

“Oh, Feliciano come sit here instead.” Scorpius was made to sit up and he, Ellie and Italy took up the other side of the compartment now, Charlie trying to woo Scorpius out of his bad mood with a promise to let him copy parts of the Divination assignment.

“Speaking of Firenze, did either of you get the Divination work done? I won’t bother asking these two.” Scorpius shut the book tight after that and gave Ellie such a peevish look, nose scrunched up and blonde brows pulled down over his narrow grey eyes. He looked extremely foul pulling a face like that, and Arthur didn’t understand why he heard Charlie laughing a little before breaking into the discussion.

“How are you so good in that class?” Was Scorpius’ answer after the train pulled out of the station and began to lug itself across London and out over the countryside. “I mean it’s interesting, I’ll grant you, Charlie, but sometimes it’s just garbled nonsense you and Finnick get into and I can’t follow a word of it.”

“You just gotta get a feel for it, really.” It was raining again outside the foggy compartment window, time slowing down inside the little booth as the children eased into happy discussion of lessons and magic. “Don’t think too hard about it and just let your other senses pick up on what to say instead.” They sounded less like the gabby little ones they’d been two years ago, still going off on tangents and muddling complicated issues with inexperienced words, but it had been a long time since Arthur had had this much extended contact with human children. He found it relaxing and invigorating at the same time.

Eventually the chatter did turn to lighter things, and with an easy prompt from Italy, out came the long-awaited discussion of Christmas gifts. Ellie started bouncing and describing a bronze-worked black leather gauntlet she’d received from Italy and Arthur just stared at him in angry wonder at how he’d thought such an extravagant gift would do anything to help the awestruck looks Ellie had been
giving him since first year.

Charlie had gotten in trouble with his fireworks which meant he hadn’t been able to look very long at the book of wandless magic tricks Arthur had sent him, but it was in his trunk and he’d flipped through a few pages of it, eager to try making quills float without using his wand.

Arthur had been particularly touched by Ellie’s gift to him of a set of brown pheasant quills: much stronger and brisker than the normal ones the school requested they all use. He’d probably end up using them for work matters and muggle calligraphy the next time he had to host other nations. Along with a box of holiday sweets for his ‘family’, there had been a jersey from Thomas Higgs’ team, signed by the rookie chaser himself and kept safe in London now where Arthur was more attached to the token than he could readily admit. From Scorpius, Arthur had a little gold ball which resembled a snitch, but was much larger and was actually a wizarding puzzle-box with the added frustration of a rubix cube: the product of an angry muggle-born, Arthur was sure.

“I thought it was fabulous, really, I solved it twice on the trip to Canada.” He would have gotten its dials and lights to sort out a third time too had he not realized six hours into the flight that there was a child a row over who was utterly flabbergasted by the sight of it. Hopefully her parents had thought it was a travel dream…

Scorpius had given Italy a flying kit that let out smoke and made designs through the air for the rider to follow and build skills with. Italy had generously refused to open the ornate green and orange bottle of smoke in Arthur’s house and had made some off-hand comment about using it as a decoration in his house in Venice, but now lied about using it over Christmas until getting in trouble with his sister for startling the neighbours.

“She’s your sister!” Ellie interrupted the exhaustive list of parcels and packages when Italy not only casually called Chiara by name, but stated the relation with a teasing ‘You saw her once, she’s so mean!’ that made the connection click. “You can talk about her now? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, it was just a-”

“A curse mark, it was a curse mark is what it was.” The way Scorpius’ voice rose up and cut Italy off like that finally explained everything.

“That’s what’s got you so worked up.” Charlie let the words out in a breathless, almost relieved kind of way. Scorpius meanwhile was disregarding the lack of space on the bench and turned his back against the window, knees up and arms folded with his potion book on the floor like he no longer had a care for it. “I swear I thought you’d swallowed seven vomit-flavoured beans, you were just fine at New Years but this morning, Scorpius you’ve just-”

“That woman showed up at our house two days before dad was set to leave for term and made him go away early.” Charlie stopped talking, Ellie didn’t scold him for being so foul, and when Arthur chanced a look at Italy instead he saw the concern poorly covering something that resembled frustration on his face. Italy’s lips were half-parted like he didn’t know whether to smile or frown, the barest trace of movement in his throat showing he had too many words to choose from, fingertips brushing back and forth over the seat while his other hand was resting on the handle of the compartment door for support.

Whether Arthur approached it as an adult or as Scorpius’ peer, there was really no consoling someone who’d had the tail end of their vacation completely spoiled for no reason.

“I’m sorry,” Italy finally admitted, making the apology very quietly as if the sound of his voice might set Scorpius off. It didn’t.
“It’s nothing you did.” Scorpius was angry at someone else entirely, and whether it was Professor Huntington or his own father, the rest of them knew better than to ask.

When the snack trolley came by a few minutes later, Scorpius cheered up enough to pull a fat galleon out of his pocket and tell the rest of them to put their money away. He was still sullen, but not quite so angry, and it was more a matter of him being able to do something nice for his friends than him showing off when Charlie was slower to look for his own coins and Ellie had a habit of buying the every-flavour beans she didn’t really like instead of the more expensive cauldron cakes she quietly coveted.

Their arrival at Hogwarts came sooner than expected, and changing into their robes was something they were all perfectly skilled at managing. The four boys changed shirts and trousers quickly before skirting out into the hall to fix their ties and robes, letting one girl back inside to make short work of her grey school skirt and blouse before they could all settle down again with untidy knots and inside-out robes.

It felt less like riding back up through prison gates in the thestral carriage that pulled them up the mountain, Arthur mulling over the strangely homey feel of looking at Hogwart’s snow-capped towers and glittering windows. He’d spent more time in this castle than in London for the last three years, and for the first time in that long, he realized how little it bothered him.

His first letter back to his brother for that term was short and to the point: ‘*What did you put in that draught you damned tosser because don’t you dare go tinkering with currency while I’m away or I’ll bash your bloody head in.*’

And then it was back to the grindstone.
With Christmas behind them and term back in full swing, the delightful Professor Alice Huntington ignored Italy completely after their return to the school. She didn’t address him in class, never passed him in the halls, and simply made herself vanish like the scarcely seen ghosts who were supposed to haunt the enchanted school.

But just because she didn’t speak to him directly, or make any move to suggest she was even aware that he’d returned to the castle after Christmas break, that didn’t mean she’d forgotten him.

Or that she wasn’t still busy with her work trying to prove she knew more about Italian history than Italy himself.

“I wish I was surprised knowing two of the nicest teachers in the school don’t like him.” If Italy was the student Professor Huntington resented most, then according to what David Baker had to say, Rose Weasley was her favourite. “Professor Firenze tried to kill him and Professor Huntington has had the most incredible things to say.”

“I wish I could pretend to care about what you think.” Being paired with Rose was a gross inconvenience for Arthur, because regardless of her parentage Arthur himself had no taste for her company. Normally it never happened anyways on account of her happy circle of Gryffindor friends including her cousin Albus, who more often than not was the one who would opt to pair up with a Slytherin for Creevey’s defense drills. Sometimes, especially when Italy was going to be the one out, Albus would practically jump to be his partner in Creevey’s class. To have Rose Weasley stand up and march over to Arthur before the Slytherins had properly decided who would be the seventh student was suspect at best.

“Straight lines please, everyone! This is a very delicate technique, and I just want you to make sure you’ve got the basics down before we proceed!”

Professor Creevey’s classroom on the second floor was very long and very wide, half the floor sunken down in deep steps like an amphitheatre where he stood at the lowest part by the blackboard and podium, the other half raised and clear of anything that would get in the way of magic drills and casting sessions. He kept a very clean, dust-free space with high ceilings and plenty of fresh air from the windows that were always opened whenever students were guaranteed to be up and walking around building up a sweat with magic.

All they were supposed to do today, with the buckets of water Creevey was setting down between every pair as they lined up on opposite sides of the room, was try to weave as thin a curtain of water as they could. It was a fire-dousing technique as well as the best way to stop flaming salamanders from overrunning an area or hurting you.

Useful stuff as always, which was why Arthur couldn’t bring himself to be bored or distracted in Creevey’s lessons.

“Professor Huntington gave me some extra reading to do over the holidays.” Now if only his partner would be silent! “And guess which name kept coming up!”

“I hear they have a lot of Luigis in Italy, but I’d have to ask Vargas.” Except that when she was silent then she was scowling and Arthur found that rather unfair until he realized he was making the exact same face back at her. He didn’t know what she had to be so offended over either, his History mark was only just on the rebound after the Italian Unit and he was dragging his feet through the
current string of lectures on Bulgaria and Armenia. She was much too far ahead of him to keep carrying on like this.

Furthermore, their lesson today simply wasn’t the place for her petulance. It wasn’t hard to use the technique Creevey had demonstrated a few times already and which Rose was already conjuring across from him, but she was condescending to him and hogging most of the water in their little bucket, so it wasn’t very easy either.

“While your technique is fantastic, Miss Weasley, you’ll recall that this is a team exercise.” And that was another reason why Arthur had unprecedented respect for Professor Creevey. He was able to swoop in with both hands clasped behind his back and an easy swagger to his bow-legged steps as he admired the wide, billowing bubble of water that was almost spherical in front of Rose instead of the long, rectangular curtain that the other pairs were trying to suspend between them, the goal being a horizontal panel of water that could be draped across wide areas, not a big bag that looked ready to pop if nudged too hard.

“Yes, Professor,” the talented but annoying witch across from Arthur grunted, bracing her weight a little lower down as the stress of maintaining the spell must have been starting to build. She’d either have to put some of the water down and share the way Creevey had intended, or drop it. Arthur lifted his wand, mouthing ‘yes professor’ with a tilt of his head to mimic her tone, then got ready to take up some of the slack as soon as she released it from her irritable little grip.

“What’s wrong? Why did you-?” the sound of water splashing on the floor made Arthur look away at where Italy had a startled look on his face and wand slack in his hand. Ellie asked her question before Arthur heard something much worse.

Arthur glanced at Creevey’s turned back and in doing so caught sight of the wall of water rushing towards him, one foot pushing back and his wand rising with a spell already on his lips to conjure a gust of wind to protect himself with. He did everything he had to block the storm of magic that came roaring towards him as Rose pushed the water out towards him and gave it more speed and power than it could have ever needed.

The water hit the wind and it caused a loud burst before cold rain came down everywhere, and there was the wet crack of ten sheets of water simultaneously slapping the stone floor as the entire classroom’s concentration snapped.

Creevey didn’t say anything, didn’t even turn around, but there was an irate silence from the lines of Slytherin students that mirrored the confusion and suspicion from the Gryffindors further down. Arthur stood there breathless for a moment, catching Charlie’s red and puffed up face next to Rose as he heard Scorpius kicking his wet shoes at the sopping floor while Italy wore such a confused, almost pouting expression instead of that stunned look from moments before. There was a slow, exasperated sigh, and then still without turning around Creevey spoke.

“That will be five points from Gryffindor, Miss Weasley.” Dennis Creevey wasn’t even in the general area of humouring childish feuds. “Alright, everyone! Try to gather an equal amount of water in your pail and let’s begin again! Look lively now! I’m not going to dismiss you early on account of damp robes!”

While trying to clean up there came an angry storm past Arthur from across the room, and then with a hard hand on his arm Charlie grabbed him at the shoulder and pushed him towards Scorpius.

“We’re switching partners,” was all his bigger friend was willing to say, and when Arthur tried asking what was going on Scorpius just silently pointed for him to take Charlie’s spot across the room next to Rose and not say anything.
About ten minutes later Rose Weasley was soaking wet, but because she set off a jinx in retaliation both her and Charlie got detention from Creevey, who seemed disappointed but honestly too used to kids being kids to get that worked up about it. Even Charlie left the lesson with a personal opinion of Creevey that was sky-high.

It was a miserable upset in what was otherwise the most practical and enjoyable class on their schedule, but as long as it got the Slytherins away from the Gryffindors, Arthur was happy to see it end.

Whatever the reading Professor Huntington had given Rose Weasley had covered, she was very happy to start gossiping over it with her friends. Then, because Gryffindors couldn’t keep a secret, that gossip became rumours. And then, because no one could trust a Snakeskin, none of the Slytherins were allowed to get any part of the story beyond ‘Vargas bad! Italians scary!’

It was three houses against one again, and Feliciano could only sulk on the outside and commit the abuse to private record. So, Hogwarts condoned shaming children’s families, officially? That was the irate assumption that North Italy chose to take as truth as a member of staff turned an entire cohort of young students against one of their peers for- for what? Spite?

Stop! -what?

There was nothing to stop or start about this mess, because it only come up as small aggressions anyways. Nothing damning, nothing hurtful, but still there. Like a tag he couldn’t cut off his clothes or the cold cross under his shirt: always there.

It was Albus jumping when he and Feliciano were put at stations too close to each other in herbology. It was the week when David Baker tried three times to open his mouth and say something directly, but then couldn’t. The fourth time-

Don’t!

Don’t?

The… fourth time David tried to talk to him was at football. The time-out whistle cut through another snowy, rainy match on the courtyard grass, and they were all miserable from the poor weather. With the ball up over his head for a throw-in, Baker looked Feliciano straight in the eye, and then gave up with a grunt and tossed the ball back into play.

No-!!

Who…?

The Gryffindors were too mean and Hufflepuff too awkward to put in the middle. Even Ravenclaw failed him! Addison Miller was now very happy to pair up with Ellie during History and Care of Magical Creatures, but she’d do anything to keep away from Feliciano, especially after lessons.

If he’d been a real child then the censure would have been devastating. Children had no control over what family legacy, concrete or imagined, they were born into. For North Italy it wasn’t so difficult to accept because, honestly, Huntington had not taught them anything he considered false. Her biases were usually off-set, she compiled multiple sources on every subject before presenting her findings to her class. She was, frankly, one of the most thorough instructors they had at Hogwarts. But she was harassing a student. She was using her knowledge of the past to hurt someone that, as far as she knew, hadn’t been born yet.
It was wrong of her, and Feliciano made sure England knew his feelings on the matter with stern looks and fake smiles. His school was poison.

Thankfully, he was not a real child and he was not emotionally devastated. It upset him, but in the hopes of helping Ellie make and keep more friends, the adult in the teenager’s body found reasons to walk away and avoid making Eliza choose between him and Miss Miller. He made himself speak the forbidden words to Scorpius: Let’s go flying! And spent his weekends zipping around the school instead. He smothered his anger with the chore of keeping Slytherin’s seeker on his toes for the upcoming match against Hufflepuff.

Up in her tower, Feliciano hoped the Headmistress knew just how much he was going to enjoy one day boarding up this terrible excuse for a school.

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Italy was up to something, again.

It was becoming a very tired song and dance as far as Arthur and Hogwarts school were both concerned. One month everything would be going along smoothly, the next-

“Do you mind if I start a fight with James Potter?”

“Yes, I do!”

The next they were not.

With the start of their next term after Christmas, Feliciano and Arthur had been relieved of their spare block and placed in elective classes of their own choosing. Arthur had, in an effort to redeem himself for his damaged History mark, opted for Arithmancy and the logical, intuitive motions of numbers. Even at a basic third year level it was difficult for him to swoop into the class a full term behind everyone else, but when he wasn’t having cryptic discussions with Italy over Scorpius’ stolen chess board, then he was re-teaching himself how to use an abacus and memorizing scrolls of numbers that someone had had the audacity to update and change in the last two hundred years since he’d last looked at them. How bothersome!

Italy, that lazy fool, had tossed himself into Music: one of his natural strengths anyways. Not only did he already have a fully functioning knowledge of music and muggle musical theory, but he never spent more than ten minutes in a given week doing anything for his class while Arthur was stuck wondering why someone had decided to add an entire column of 42s to his textbook table.

Arthur really should have opted for the easier class as well, because it would have made keeping tabs on Italy that much easier without the additional workload and genuine memorization he had to do in order to catch up and remain afloat. It was awful not knowing if Italy was out on the make-shift football pitch with Baker or in the duelling room with Flint, and then of course there was always the mind-boggling revelation that maybe he was out flying with Scorpius instead. He was a social butterfly on the world stage and in the school corridors, and it was bound to give Arthur ulcers before this year was over.

Especially because he was acting so strangely now on top of things.

Someone as busy as Italy should have been extremely focused at all times or floating gently through his days not paying much mind to anything. Instead, at seemingly random points throughout February, Italy would be in the middle of saying something or doing something else when he’d look
liked someone’d just kicked him.

It happened first in History class during a test, where Italy was sitting next to Flint and Arthur peered up desperately from an essay question on Machiavelli’s wizarding roots only to see Feliciano suddenly bolt upright on his seat, stare straight ahead across the room, and then after a queer check over both shoulders, hunker back down and get to work.

“I thought someone was speaking.” Was all the explanation he’d given later, which Arthur considered a lie because the room had been silent.

He did it again in Herbology a few days later. They were pruning Mandrake leaves and he almost took out the main artery on the squalling plant that Arthur had wrestled down while Italy brandished the sheers. He could have killed the damned thing for being so careless, but he’d gone ram-rod straight and quickly spun around looking at the Gryffindors, and then back at the busy yelling between Scorpius and Eliza about how not to hold the beastly thing in their own pot.

“What are you doing!?”

“Didn’t you hear that?”

“I hear the sound of my patience running out Vargas, focus!”

It was frustrating and simply not going to do, especially with February slowly rolling into March and Italy remaining baffled by silence.

“Leave Potter alone I simply beg of you.” With March finally bringing a break in the endless snow and rain, Arthur was losing his conviction to stop Italy from doing something stupid.

“One little fight, Arthur, I want to know what all the whispering’s about!”

“Then ask Baker! Get the twins a new football!” But just saying it he knew neither of those options would work. They’d tried asking David and Arthur had even bartered Ellie’s owl-training skills trying to get the twins to open up, but the Hufflepuffs had either been sworn to silence or simply felt like they would be betraying something by saying what it was.

“Look, if Vargas won’t tell you then it’s really not my place.” Arthur was coming to like David very much, enough so that he was alright not pairing up with Italy in Astronomy if it meant standing with the taller Hufflepuff. They spoke softly to each other atop the tower with their telescopes angled and charts ready to map a series of comets coming close for a star-shower one March evening, but Arthur was thoroughly disappointed. “It’s not Weasley I’m worried about, it’s him. You’re his best mate so I’m sure he’d tell you if it was important.”

Italy’s logic was that by exploiting James Potter’s awful temper and ego in the duelling club, they could get their answer. It was actually a sound plan too, especially after the Gryffindor teams’ damaging win over Ravenclaw and Scorpius’ near miss against Hufflepuff that put their two houses neck and neck for the house cup. If there was ever a way to get a rise out of their upperclassman, it was giving Potter an opportunity to gloat about something.

“I swear to God if it’s something basic you should have just told me from the start, I’ll give you a black eye.”

“Just leave my hair alone for once, per favore.”

Out of them all, the Duelling Club was Charlie’s calling. It was what he spent all week looking forward to, and put every conceivable effort into doing better with. He was always religiously in
attendance at every single Saturday meeting, usually with Flint and Italy in tow. As whispers were beginning to start up about the end of year tournament, Arthur was allowed to set aside his Arithmancy for a few hours every Saturday and tag along with them.

“Psst!”

It was in the middle of that tagging, with Gloria and Charlie speeding on ahead of them, that the nations received their first break in months.

“Psst! Over here!”

Italy froze the way he had been all month but Arthur heard it this time too, both of them coming to a sudden halt and then looking this way and that down the hall. It was an unexpectedly bright Saturday with weak spring sunshine filtering in through the grated windows, but while the fleeting voice sounded close at hand, there was the patter of tiny footfalls and the breathless sound of a runner they couldn’t see.

“Oh please, just turn this way!” Next to them on the wall was a large gilded frame with a great big dark oil painting. The image was so old and grimy that Arthur needed a moment to recognize the outline of a library and low-lit tables with flickering candles, and it surprised him that such an ugly thing could still be hanging without care in such a well-travelled hall.

“Is it you?” Italy’s question was out of place, but he hurried over to the painting’s edge and stood there, tilting his head like if he stood at the proper angel he could look around the frame like a window into the painted world. “Are you the one who’s been calling me so much?” It made sense, but-

“There are no picture frames in the green houses, Vargas.” So Arthur hurried up next to him and both of them waited patiently, watching as a half-hidden door in the back of the image opened up and a surprising spirit of green tights and pink flowers hurried into view. Perspective playing with itself until the clearly formed, youthful face of a beautiful wizard was resting in front of them, his brown eyes and swept-back brown hair reminding Arthur of someone, but he couldn’t place the name.

“Calling you? No, this is my first time trying to escape-” Escape? “I’m so lucky I found you! It’s you, though, isn’t it?”

Italy blinked wildly and the two of them looked at each other. Arthur took comfort in the way Italy’s brown eyes were jumping around trying to make sense of what was going on, but sense had a habit of falling flat in this place.

“It-” The painting seemed disappointed, crouching down in his frame and lowering his voice as he shrank down to their height on the wall. When he frowned, it poured from his soul-full gaze and saddened the delightful play of his cheeks. “It can’t really be you though, she must have been lying-or mistaken…”

“Please start from the beginning, I don’t understand,” Italy pleaded softly, making his voice come so slowly and sadly showing he didn’t mean to be rude or take up what sounded like the painting’s precious time. “None of your kind have come close to me since my first year at Hogwarts, what’s everyone saying?”

“That there’s a Vargas at Hogwarts- at least that’s what she keeps saying but it’s too good to be true!”
“Someone’s been talking about me? Who?” Italy asked, his voice holding a tremble that Arthur understood as him rightfully wondering if this was a good thing or just another sign of Rose’s rumours. At least from the way the familiar face in the wall puffed out his cheeks and drew himself up to his proper painted height, it seemed that they were about to find out.

“Oh, the Professor who dared have me taken down from my place in the Ravenclaw Dormitory, and stuffed me in that ugly little room on the seventh floor, that’s who! And all because my artist was Italian- I’m a British Lord!” So that was what Scotland had meant by Huntington being in charge of the painting investigation, she’d quarantined the Italian works up on the seventh floor. “Now, I wasn’t a very good one and I never did become much for the muggle history books, but according to a wizard’s text I read about myself once. Apparently I did quite well here at Hogwarts before gallivanting across Europe! I went around putting love potions in the wine of beautiful women at all the courts, but when I arrived in Italy I accidentally seduced the Boy-King’s wife and was killed by him in a duel- a fabulous story, don’t you think?”

Arthur was baffled.

“I… the Italian kingdom didn’t exist for very long!” One, almost two hundred years and Arthur just stared at Italy, mouth agape, waiting for any kind of proper explanation. “If the Italian King had ever done something like that then I- then England would have known about it!” He did mean Italian King, as in the King of all of Italy? Not the individual little city states like Parma and Bologna and Naples? Not that South Italy had been a small kingdom in European standards, but whatever his ties to Spain Arthur would have known about one of his lords, Wizard or not, being executed in Italy.

Italy himself seemed petrified, an honest doe-in-the-headlights stare flipping between Arthur and the painting. There was shock to be sure, but was that not-?

The painting just laughed at both of them, a high, musical sound that Arthur wouldn’t have minded at all had it not been directed at his misfortune.

“Goodness me! Not the muggle king! Did the muggles even have a king?” Not the-? How! Had Italy’s wizards chosen royalty?

“I’d rather not think about it.” Italy answered sullenly, but Arthur just looked between them again when Italy bit his lip and started fidgeting. He knew something? He knew something!

“Out with it,” Arthur said shortly.

“Please do!” Agreed the painting, “You see I’d so love to-”

“Italy doesn’t have any kings,” Italy said. “Not anymore, and not for a long time. Arthur,” And he looked at him, surprisingly brisk in a way that made Arthur start to scowl. “We should get going!”

“What do you know?” He accused.

“I know enough, lets go.”

“Vargas.” But Italy was already walking. “Vargas! Don’t ignore me!” Arthur had to catch up.

“I told you! I want to fight Potter!” Why that sniveling little-

“Vargas!”

In the end, Arthur was compelled to give Italy a black eye, but about an hour later it had healed.
“I told you, at my place we do things a little differently.”

“There is nothing little about making yourselves into kings!”

That was the rumour; that was the secret; that was the bloody whispering and jumping and staring! They thought Vargas was a bloody royal!

Arthur had needed the good half-hour of time (after punching him), to calm down while Italy was with Professor Malfoy insisting his face hurt but would be fine without magic. By the time Italy was released and dinner cleaned up, the Slytherins had detoured from the dungeons up in the opposite direction to the owlery, making eye-contact and funny hand-gestures to get Baker, Miller, and the Finnigans to excuse themselves and follow. They did try to get Albus’ attention, but it was safer for them not to walk by the Gryffindor table which was so far away from their side of the hall and not something that would be missed.

When they asked Baker to do it instead, he claimed he didn’t want to and was quick to follow the Slytherins up to the Owlery for Italy’s long-awaited explanation.

“Yes, historically Vargas has been a royal name, but I’m not a king, I’m not a prince, and Italy has been a proper republic for years now.” Italy was very direct about explaining things to their friends, and the way Scorpius blinked three times at the information and the Hufflepuffs visibly relaxed to hear him also helped calm Arthur’s frustration. “And even before the war, we didn’t rule as in, you know, point at something and make a law about it. My family has just been consulted, and if there was ever a very big problem to decide without bloodshed then that was where we would come in.”

“Wait, Weasley thinks you’re a prince?” Scorpius needed to hear it three times before he understood it, and even then, he still looked confused. “So, is that why you were brought to Hogwarts then?”

“You did once tell me that you picking a school in Italy would have caused problems.” Ellie piped up quietly where she was flexing her hand inside her hawking gauntlet, a menacingly large flock of school owls perched over her head and on the beams close by, focused on her and occasionally jostling one another waiting to see who she’d summon first for treats and play. “I guess… this is why?”

“A little bit,” was the cryptic answer Italy gave back with a gentle smile on his face.

“Last year at the duelling tournament…” David was standing behind the Finnigan twins and had already given them a firm look about their excited whispering. His had his arms folded and one foot scuffing back and forth over the floor as he considered his words slowly. “That wizard- your brother, didn’t he throw his wand away after cursing you?”

“It wasn’t his wand,” Arthur calmly answered, offering a bit more information from his spot against one of the half-walls of the owlery. “He took it from my brother, without permission, because he hasn’t got one of his own.”

“It feels like ages ago that you said something about that, Vargas.” Charlie gave a great big shiver where he’d been otherwise watching the owls next to Scorpius, “I thought he was a squib when you said it but the tournament proved me wrong.”

“Did he just never have one?” Ian squeaked, then slapped both hands over his mouth and looked at Finn, who was vibrating next to him and picked up the train of thought.

“The wand chooses the wizard! You can’t just take somebody’s and get it to work!”

“But he did!”
“Enough.” Keeping his underclassmen from embarrassing themselves with a word, David kept control but didn’t try to pretend he knew more than them or could come up with a proper answer. Baker was just as curious as everyone else and waited while Italy didn’t say anything, just smiled and let the silence last.

“My brother snapped his wand himself when he rejected the title after the war.” This much Arthur had thought he’d known about the wand, but not the title. “The Death Eaters did terrible things in Italy with the King’s support, so Lovino decided the position shouldn’t exist anymore.” And there was one nugget of information in that statement that Arthur had never heard before: support?

“My brother works as a consultant between the Wizard and Muggle governments in Italy now, and his wife handles more work like social projects and archiving. He’s not a king, she isn’t a queen, and I’m definitely not a prince!” Italy just laughed his way through the heavy subject, and Arthur took a few deep breaths and closed his eyes to get away from the headache. Italian wizarding society was different from how things were in Britain. He couldn’t imagine, even five hundred years ago, ever placing himself in a position where the Wizarding World deferred to him about anything.

It meant that the wizards of Italy knew about nations then, or at least Immortality. And it probably wasn’t just South Italy either, they no doubt knew about North Italy and Sicily too. Maybe even the rest of the family at one point before the northern branches had died out…

It was all very complicated. A proper mess that seemed like a very Weasley thing to spread around the school.

“Could you just please make sure Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw understand this? I wonder what book Miss Weasley had to read to come up with something like this! It’s crazy!” Crazy was one word for it, along with inconvenient, stressful, and a little bit rude.

“What about Gryffindor?” Was Addison Miller’s question, the Ravenclaw girl standing there in the evening air with her fingers running through her gold hair. Her wide eyes were aimed at the floor and the blue ribbon she’d previously had holding her hair back was wrapped around her wrist. “Shouldn’t we all go find Albus and Rose and them?”

“Rose Weasley’s the one who started this whole mess,” Scorpius piped up, a sour look still twisting his thin mouth as he finally shook Gus off his arm and let the old owl waddle across the floor to Ellie instead. “Let her figure it out on her own.”

“What if instead of telling them the truth we made a big show of it instead?” Charlie offered the suggestion and Arthur, for all his ire, was curious to hear the taller boy out. “All the third year Slytherins let Vargas sit first and we bow to him all proper when he comes our way.”

“Please don’t,” Italy keened from across the floor.

“We could get you a crown!” Ian Finnigan was beside himself watching Finn gasp and speak. “Just a little silver thing to keep in your bag, Vargas, and then you can trip and drop it right in front of Hugo in the hall!”

“Come to think of it there’s a concoction in my new potion’s book that makes a wonderful silver paint.” Scorpius’ suggestion was the perfect catch-22 for Italy out-doing Arthur at Christmas gifting. He was rather pleased with this budding plan even if Italy himself looked horrified.

“Do you know how much trouble Huntington will put me in?”

“Huntington’s the one who gave Weasley the book in the first place,” Miller pointed out.
“But you’ve got to really act the part too, Vargas,” David was laughing and Arthur was grinning watching Italy shuffle his feet and spin around nervously like this was the worst idea he’d heard in half a century. “Stick out your pinky at tea time and strut around like a peacock while the rest of us bow and scrape.”

In the end their plans really did go belly up and wind up as little more than just a bit of vicious teasing. However, in the coming weeks that didn’t stop Scorpius and Baker from pairing up for the first time in Charms class and whispering very loudly in the corner of Flitwick’s class about crowns and diadems.

The next time Addison and Italy tried to leave the History room at the same time, Miss Miller dropped a jestful little curtsey which Italy answered with the motions of taking off a hat and sweeping it extravagantly in front of him in a bow.

Ultimately it was Chiara of Sicily who cleared it all up for the school by sending Feliciano’s late birthday gift with a complete surprise: an English howler!

“I would not be wasting your precious study time with a letter, but my husband has not stopped braying like a donkey since you told him there are idiots at that school of yours who think that you are a prince! Hah! What a beautiful education you are receiving, Feliciano. Perhaps when you return home you will be fit for licking stamps and be able to tell which end of the shovel to dig a ditch with!”

She truly did hate him, at least that was what Arthur assumed until Feliciano’s eyes went twice their normal size and he clutched a silver cup of tiramisu to his chest like it contained the secret to world peace. Scorpius attempted the tired old line of lamentation ‘I wonder what it would be like to try it just once’ and was promptly hit with a warning curse that stopped up his nose for an hour. There would be no sharing of the birthday treat.

Suffice it to say Gryffindor house was, as a cohesive group, entirely fed up by the beginning of April.

And so too were Gryffindor’s own intra-house friends.

In the first week of April David’s football was blasted to pieces in the middle of one of their games, nearly taking Ian Finnigan’s foot off when he gave it a kick and was thrown back by the explosion of an air-pressure charm. Professor Hadrian, who was Hufflepuff Head, Baker’s Muggle Studies Professor and the sponsor for the budding club, was absolutely out-raged when they went to her office with the pieces and Professor Malfoy was called to address the ringing in Ian’s ears from the blast.

Just before Easter Break began, Ellie was the first person at the Slytherin table to notice when Addison Miller didn’t come with the other Ravenclaws into the great hall. It was Margaret Finnick who, later that afternoon after taking an extra-credit potions assignment up to Professor Malfoy for marking, came back with the reason why.

“Somebody chopped off all her hair while she was sleeping. I heard her crying behind one of the curtains.”

Arthur saw Italy’s little black report book making appearances again in his hands and sliding in and out of the breast pocket of his robes. Instead of spending the first Saturday of Easter Break down in Hogsmeade with everyone else, the four third year boys sat perched at the top of the girl’s dorm steps in Slytherin house trying to coax Ellie to at least come up to the owlery with them.
“It’s my fault!”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Ellie. Flitwick said—”

“Curse what Flitwick said! Flitwick punished those Ravenclaw girls, but they wouldn’t have done anything to her at all if not for me!”

Over the next few days, Ellie not only avoided all possible contact with Addison and her shocking, boy-cut blonde locks, but she was almost vicious about making sure she was seated or placed as far from their Ravenclaw classmates as possible. She spent more time in Myrtle’s toilet during April than she had since first year, and Arthur didn’t know whose broken heart he felt worse for: Ellie’s, or Addison’s.

Wayward curses and constant heckling were a reality in Slytherin that meant Arthur and his friends had easily adopted the habit of detouring to walk along with first-years. Even if it meant taking a little bit longer to reach the seventh floor from the fourth, it was just what one did. And although it had stood out more strongly when Zabini had been there to trumpet and parade the underclassmen around, Arthur still caught sight of fifth- and sixth-year Slytherins who would abruptly change direction when they saw the third-years, and either follow or lead them in the general direction of their lessons.

This system did not exist for any other house, and as April progressed Arthur was actually called to notice it.

For one, there was no way Addison Miller’s younger sister Nancy would have been able to get into a shrieking, hair-pulling match with Lily Potter if either of them had been escorted by older Ravenclaws or Gryffindors. To hear Charlie tell it afterwards, he was damned proud of himself for taking a blast of ice-cold water to the face from Albus Potter’s wand because it meant the middle Potter child hadn’t hurt the younger Miller in a protective stint.

For once, where Gryffindors and Slytherins in their year came into conflict, Albus offered no apologies or peace-making over the incident. According to Charlie the detention period they served with Professor Huntington was two long hours of dead silence spent dusting and organizing books in the library.

James Potter crooning loudly in the great hall about what a shoe-in to win Gryffindor was for the Quidditch cup just put everyone’s final patience to the test.

One Friday evening near the end of April, a detour through the owlery after a late astronomy test gave the Slytherins an unexpected surprise. Finnick and Flint had expressed no reason to go up to the owls where Italy had an important parcel to send off to his brother that couldn’t wait until tomorrow morning, and instead of letting him go alone the other five of them went together.

When they returned down to the dungeons via the fourth floor passage by the infirmary, their surprise came in the form of the three mysterious figures they stumbled upon in the dark green glow of the caverns. Two of them were just standing there, but the third was pacing furiously until they were spotted around a corner by the Slytherins following a different hallway to their house door.

It was David Baker, who looked miserable to be standing there in his house robe, Nancy Miller, who was very tiny but standing firmly, and Addison Miller who was glaring at the damp stones like they’d done her personal offense.

“Oh no—” Arthur had been walking next to Ellie when they all turned and saw the other students, but then she backed up straight into him and almost knocked him to the floor.
“There you are!”

“What are you three doing down here at this hour?” Scorpius was the one to ask the question and interrupt the elder Miller’s shout. It was Arthur with Italy’s help who, despite knowing Ellie’s reason, caught her shoulders and asked her what was wrong.

The answer, of course, was Addison Miller.

“Eliza Gamp, you answer me!”

Addison Miller was a tall girl with very long limbs and a thin, awkward face. She had a strong helping of freckles across her round nose and cheeks, and her brown eyes looked a little too big and a little too round. Her hair had been something she’d taken a great deal of pride in, growing it so long and letting it naturally curl in sweeping, bouncing gold waves. She’d always come to class wearing a different colour ribbon, or maybe a lovely set of clips or pins, but that was more or less over now.

Her hair had been shorn off and her bangs snipped away, leaving her now with locks so short it was a pixie and not much else. No more braiding or weaving or curling, and with her freckles and thin hair the yellow was unflattering and made the apples of her cheeks stand out too far. It was awful being a teenager, but it was worse to have your appearance marred for no reason.

“Don’t you dare run away from me!”

“I’m not running, I’m going to bed!” And Eliza stopped trying to push through Arthur and Italy, turned briskly around and marched down the hall away from the out-of-house students.

“That’s not the way to your dorm!” Addison shouted.

“Actually, it is,” Charlie’s voice was rarely soft, but he was trying very hard not to make things worse as Gamp stormed away. “You lot are standing down a dead end, the door is-” Scorpius gave Charlie a swat to shut him up and David gave himself a brisk shake before speaking.

“I told you it wouldn’t be that easy to find!” He hollered, hounding the Ravenclaw until they were all clumped together, Nancy Miller a black smudge hovering by Charlie.

“It’s a hall with a giant snake at the end!” Addison yelled back. Her hands were balled up tight as she didn’t seem ready to slow down. “It was a reasonable assumption!”

“All of them have a giant snake at the end!” But Miss Miller wasn’t listening, because Arthur and Italy both immediately ducked out of her way as she came storming between them to follow Eliza. The girls vanished and the boys, plus little Nancy, only hesitated for a moment before quickly turning and going after them.

“Why are you down here, Baker?” Scorpius asked as politely as he could, baffled about everything that was going on while David rolled his eyes with an annoyed huff.

“I have no idea.” Arthur had never heard David sound so cross. “When I got back from our test this evening, Miller was kicking up a loud ruckus at the Hufflepuff door. I’ve still got my telescope and everything because once the twins started fussing about going with her the Head Boy sent me off instead! She said she wanted to find your dormitory, of all things!”

“Well, that’s a little stupid since I don’t think anyone outside our house has seen the Slytherin dorm in at least five hundred years.” Arthur’s comment inspired such an aggressive sound in the back of David’s throat that the nation picked up his pace to avoid an encounter with the disgruntled badger.
“Lily’s brother didn’t hurt you when you took that spell, did he? That was you, wasn’t it?”

“If Potter’d kept his wrist straight then maybe, but it was just a little cold is all.” At least Charlie and Nancy were having a delightful little chat in the back of the group, but only until they caught up with the two older girls.

“Stay away from me!” Arthur stumbled and Scorpius, who was leading, brought the group to a slow, unsteady stop to keep them from getting caught in the shrill cross-fire of two witches holding a stand-off outside the Slytherin dorm’s alcove.

“You’re supposed to be my friend! We said we’d be best friends!” Goodness did they ever know how to raise their voices. The stone walls did not help.

“Well we can’t because your other friends will-”

“They’re NOT MY FRIENDS!”

“I feel like we should go.” Italy whispered, and it was Arthur’s turn to deal out a swat. A check of his watch told them they only had thirty minutes before lights-out, where did he expect them to run off to?

“They’re supposed to be my sisters and they did this to me! I was sleeping and they-”

“So why are you down here if you know they’ll just do it again? And they will if you stick around Slytherins!”

“Then they aren’t my friends and I can’t ever be friends with them! It makes my skin crawl just thinking about it- it could be anyone at all in that house! It doesn’t matter what professor Flitwick says because they Grey Lady won’t answer and so he doesn’t know who did it anymore than I do!”

The six of them around the corner waited in silence, and then had to suffer with the weight of the air settling around them when Ellie didn’t say anything.

Maybe half a minute later, Arthur heard the heartbreakingly familiar sound of one of his friends sucking in a shaky, sobbing breath through her nose and covering a whimper deep in the back of her throat before speaking. He hated knowing Ellie was crying…

“And what about next time?” Her words sounded thick with tears and Arthur just hated it, closing his own eyes and shuffling around so he could lean on the cold stone wall to the corner, arms folded and head bowed next to Italy whose shoulder was pressed against Arthur’s.

“Will you still be my friend instead of running away?” And Addison’s voice, if he really paid attention to it, didn’t sound much clearer than Ellie’s. Her confidence was just as broken. “I need at least one friend to stay with me…”

“But it will all be my fault…”

“No!” David’s voice made Arthur jump and he heard Italy shriek in surprise.

“No-?” Scorpius sounded just as startled, but then took his voice back and leaned out from behind the corner so he could, presumably, see where the girls were standing. “No! It’ll be their fault for being terrible! Like evil geese instead of proper wizards!”

“Geese aren’t evil, Scorpius-”
“Yes, they are, Ellie! Yes, they are!”

Just the way he said it; the serious tone of his raised voice with the deep-seated tremble of a boy who had seen and experienced too much at the hands of an incompetent wild-life professor. Arthur listened to him and then found himself with his head tipped back against the wall and laughing.

“You ruined their moment, you two,” Arthur scolded them without even trying to stop his own laughter.

“I don’t care, because I’m freezing my arse off down here: how can you lot sleep in the dungeons?”

“It’s actually really warm in the common room.” Italy explained.

“Warm I think you mean boiling,” Charlie was inches from bringing up the same argument he’d been having with Italy since the official change from winter to spring: it was too damned hot in the dormitory with the heating charm still activated. Arthur was about to get Scorpius to help him stop the bickering when he looked and his other friend was gone.

Peering out from behind the corner, he saw just enough through the dungeon’s shadows to recognize two young women locked in a tight hug, and could respect the noble young wizard hurrying up to the dormitory entrance so he could explain what all the shrieking and yelling had been about to the baffled house Prefect standing in the lamplight.

A few days later and Arthur was more than happy to drop ten pounds of his own money on a new football for David, despite Italy secretly asking his brother for the same thing from Rome. Both of them were completely oblivious to the fact that David’s family had already parcelled up one so all three balls arrived within the same week. Two were kept in Professor Hadrian’s office as spares to be dragged out so there was less wait time for doing tricks and kicks on the pitch.

The football club’s materials were each specially charmed by Professor Hadrian herself to repel wayward magic.

Miss Miller was most gracious about refusing a hair-growing potion from Scorpius. It made for a rather exciting afternoon at the end of April until, in an effort to show her it was well prepared, he tested it. Italy was aghast when he arrived in the owlery after duelling club only to find out Gino’s coat had expanded to three times its normal volume and that Arthur had offered no help to the children who frantically tried to groom the animal before it could suffocate.

“He scratched Nancy.”

“My cat does not scratch people!”

“You’re maybe over-reacting, Vargas.”

“He won’t come out from under my bed! He will not come out! What did you barbarians do to my cat!”

Italy suffered with another bought of Huntington’s detention for going off again that Tuesday when Addison passed a note from her desk with Ellie claiming she was sorry. To be fair, he probably shouldn’t have screamed “Yes, you should be sorry!” in Italian.

April came to a colourful close, and for Arthur it meant they were one more happy step closer to the end of third year at Hogwarts.

He would be thankful to see it end.
Duel Stressors

Chapter Notes

The Splinch Arc begins now.

It wouldn’t leave him alone.

‘This way!’

No!

‘Look!’

He could hear it but he couldn’t really hear it. England asked him about the distraction whenever they had a moment to be alone, but Feliciano couldn’t give a proper answer. Even Charlie noticed him jerk up at the half-heard sound that wasn’t a voice, just a feeling.

‘Here!’

It’s wrong!

‘Come!’

He felt it in his chest and he tasted it in the back of his mouth: a cold, clammy grip that rose up and faded, ripping him from whatever he’d been thinking or doing at the time. The closest to action that Feliciano came to was a sudden sprint down the third floor hall from the music room that forced him to skid to a halt at the corner.

Nothing came of it.

‘Listen, listen…!’

It wasn’t a spell and England checked him for a curse, Ellie asked Myrtle to see if he was being haunted and the dead girl in the bathroom just howled that she wasn’t a detective’s kit.

He could have tried to focus more on his note-keeping, or worked harder at the duelling club but it was no use. This was why he was at Hogwarts to begin with, wasn’t it? To figure out what was wrong with the school?

But that still meant that on Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, Feliciano and Charlie went straight to the fifth-floor duelling hall for practice. The intensity of the club had kicked up recently and now met three times a week, all in preparation for the May 2nd tournament,

‘OBEY!’

“What!”

“What? Mister Vargas, sit down.” At least, Feliciano went straight to the club if it meant he could survive having a whisper in his ear that no one else could hear. This feeling, combined with the stress
Feliciano wasn’t going to compete in the tournament this year. He would have loved the extra fifteen points for Slytherin to help them edge-out Gryffindor, but he couldn’t afford to pass up an opportunity to talk to his brother in private. He could just skip being in the great hall completely and hide in a classroom with Lovino for a good, thorough discussion of what was going on.

Lovino would probably say it was just the charm doing things to his head.

But Feliciano didn’t have the luxury of taking it off again, so he couldn’t prove his brother wrong or right. Not until June.

So! He was going to throw his preliminary match. It was something he already planned on blaming on his lack of practice thanks to Huntington’s detentions. If he saw one more list of English irregular verbs then he was going to eat his own pointed hat. Besides, there was no reason to assume Gloria and Charlie wouldn’t go all the way and win it in the Third-Year bracket for Slytherin, so when the third years settled down for bed on the night of April 31st, Feliciano as content as he could manage.

He had a letter from Lovino which he re-read from that morning. The black script had told him that because he didn’t sound like he was joking; his brother had agreed to come up on the 2nd with Scotland. He was probably going to bring Chiara, but the way Lovino’s quill had stalled and let a bit of ink pool on the parchment showed his hesitation. Had he been more worried about bringing her, or about telling Feliciano?

“Best of luck then, Vargas,” Charlie was puffed up like a well-fed rooster, strutting around with his nightshirt on and wand sleeve still in his hand before he could settle it under his pillow for the night. Feliciano brushed his fingers over his brother’s wide signature and then put the letter away. “You’re gonna need it tomorrow when we go head to head!”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, really.” So Feliciano played it up, whining a little with Gino already curled up in his lap to take the letter’s place. England was sitting on his own bed, legs crossed and knobby English knees sticking out of his shorts. They’d been discussing Feliciano’s plan when Charlie came in from his bath. “You sent poor Ian against the wall with that blast-back charm today!”

“I did, didn’t I?” And the way Charlie flashed a wide, satisfied grin almost made Feliciano burst out laughing, because he was just so proud of being so brash. Lights out came as soon as Scorpius wandered into the dorm room with a stack of papers from the transfiguration homework he’d been doing in the library with Ellie and Addison. The fourth boy tossed the homework on the floor next to his bed with a hiss and crawled under the blankets with barely a good-night.

Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup by exactly one hundred and fifty points. There would be no point talking to Scorpius again until at least the end of June.

Unlike last year where there had been so much ripe tension between Slytherin and Gryffindor, the only Slytherin competitors in the Preliminary round for Creevey’s Duelling Tournament were Italy, Charlie, and Gloria. Scorpius was too distraught over the points tally that had put the Quidditch Cup in Gryffindor’s hands, Ellie had no real interest in getting her wand blasted out of her hands again, Finnick was a constant observer even at club meetings, and Arthur didn’t see a reason to throw himself into the mix.
Regardless, Gloria was guaranteed a spot in the finals because as the second years finished up their matches and the third year Slytherins came in to watch or compete, Charlie and Italy looked miserable.

Arthur had slept just fine last night, as had Scorpius, but at breakfast that morning Italy had croaked in Arthur’s ear that no less than four times he’d heard and felt whatever was giving him so much reason to worry, and his startled gasps had clearly woken Charlie, still a damned light sleeper, every single time.

So Gloria was a shoe-in to win, and while Professor Malfoy gave the three of them the same lecture he had last year about the loser of the first match having to go against the third person to decide the two competitors in their year, Arthur’s attention wavered to the other tables.

The Finnigan twins were chatting happily at their Hufflepuff bench. Their round of duels was already complete, and Ian was kicking one foot against the floor, cheerful enough but still with shoulders bowed and idle shrugs. Finn was vibrating where he sat however, so unlike his brother it meant he’d qualified. David was likely in the crowd of third-year Hufflepuffs waiting to get started.

There was a particularly loud shout from the Ravenclaw table where their first match had begun, and Arthur craned his head around Professor Malfoy’s frame to get a look at Addison Miller looking positively pleased with herself as she stepped down off the platform. There were many, many Ravenclaws, from both second and third year, sitting in the great hall.

Obviously, they’d taken their third-place finish in Quidditch with great offense, and were looking to make a come-back in Duelling.

With a flick of their wands Arthur groaned a little on Italy’s behalf when his wand gave off a faint red light which matched Flint’s. Of course, he would have to lose two matches in a row, but his troubled frown was laughed off a moment later with a kind word to Gloria before the two of them mounted the duelling platform. They both marched down the rubbery white surface that had been the Slytherin dining table a few hours ago, reached their respective squares of green, and waited for Professor Malfoy’s signal to bow and begin.

Gloria was given first strike, her stiff little bow popping upright as her wand came up in a flurry that said she dearly remembered how he’d ousted her from the tournament last year. Flint’s wand tip twirled viciously to paint a blue corkscrew in the air, and Arthur gasped when a thick crack of blue lightning jetted down the platform.

As much as he wanted to lose, a lightning bolt made a similar sound to a gun going off, and Vargas was never one to get shot as he dropped to one knee and reflexively slashed his wand forward. The bright orange ribbon of an itching charm slithered free and like a wind-dancer’s curtains spread out to rush forward-

But then Feliciano remembered himself, and stood up in time to take Flint’s panicked and wildly thrown disarming spell straight to the chest. It cancelled out his hex and, with what looked like a full-body convulsion as he instinctively resisted the magic, his wand was firmly ejected from his grasping fingers.

There was no silence, only shock.

“Wh-?”

“How did you stand up!” Scorpius gave a beastly roar next to Arthur, but with just a quick glance it was clear how desperately confused the poor boy was by what had just happened. He looked like
Vargas had just plucked his broom clean of bristles and scored on his own team, too horrified to be properly angry with him.

“Why would he do that?” Miss Finnick was on Arthur’s other side so he heard her question, he then took a rude punch to the shoulder from her as well. “Why did he do that?”

“I don’t bloody know-!”

“I- I panicked!” Italy’s voice went shrill coming up with the excuse, but he did a good job of looking shaken up and almost terrified on that platform. “That was so scary-! You’ve really been working on that spell and- and I didn’t see it coming!!”

He was laying it on a little thick considering how complicated the wand-work was, but Arthur held his breath waiting for the rest of the students to buy into his little story as Italy was handed his wand back and Gloria was excused from the platform to come sit with the rest of them. She had a pinched, fussy little look on her face like she’d just bitten into a rotten apple, and Arthur only waited until he noticed that much before immediately dropping his guilty eyes to the floor.

Professor Malfoy wasn’t interested in hurrying Italy and Charlie up, they had an entire hour of time booked for the third-year matches and there were only two of them to get out of the way. He just remained in his place on a raised platform that looked suspiciously like an overturned cauldron while the two students shared a brief back and forth at the platform steps. When Charlie seemed ready, he gave Italy a rough slap on the shoulder as if telling him to get his head in the game again, and they both climbed up with smiles and a short laugh from Charlie. Italy resumed his position down at the far-end of the table, and when Malfoy nodded to him to say he had first strike, they waited for the signal and then bowed.

It just wouldn’t do for Italy to go down in less than three volleys from Charlie because the two of them sparred too much in the Duelling club. If he stepped into something or misfired too dramatically then their friend would know instantly: he had a sharper eye than Arthur had originally guessed, but would probably catch the difference between a feint and a genuine mistake.

Which was why as soon as Italy’s head came up to set his sights on Charlie, his whole arm went behind the looping swing to pull his wand up over his head and then bring it down with the thick, black body of a viper ripping itself free and darting fast and wild down the platform. There was an excited grin on Charlie’s face when he spread his feet and buckled his weight down, a thirst in his eyes as he rolled one shoulder back and thrust his arm forward with the licking green light of sizzling fire that rolled down from his shoulder and concentrated itself out through the wand tip.

The snake was vapourised in the same instant a blast of starlight cracked behind Higgs’ head and almost sent him tumbling onto his own face. It was the perfect opening for a disarm spell and Italy couldn’t not take it, so when Charlie was given the time to regroup and slammed his foot forward to catch his weight, Arthur didn’t look at what spell he let off because his gaze swung back around at Italy.

He was staring at the floor— he was staring straight at the middle of the platform! That wasn’t the way to throw a match, standing there with his wand down and feet spread under his robe so he looked like a statue or a life-sized bishop on a chess board! And the terrified look in his eyes didn’t- didn’t- the what?

“Vargas!”

“E- Expecto-!”
He got his wand to move but his eyes didn’t see the blast-back charm, and Arthur found himself on
his feet when a horrified scream from the other end of the table cancelled out the bang of Italy being
launched off his feet and flung through the air.

Charlie was gone, and with a startled wave of his wand Professor Malfoy caught Italy before he
could slam head-first into the stones and break his neck. The Slytherins were gob-smacked until,
weakly, Higgs was heard scuffling on the floor and his curly hair, then the rest of his square face,
slowly rose from over the edge of the platform.

Italy wasn’t feigning anything when Arthur started at a brisk pace towards him, the other nation’s
eyes down again at the same vacant angle where he’d been set down on his feet on the floor. His
wand was still rolling across the stones where he’d dropped it and his whole body stood there
swaying like he was getting ready to move in three different directions once he made up his mind.
His face looked washed out, and it took until Arthur was right there in front of him to recognize the
effect of mild back-lash from a spell failing to come together.

“Did you-? Was that a patronus?” Arthur whispered the last part, a hand grabbing Italy’s sleeve
under the shoulder because it seemed like he needed tactile proof that Arthur was in fact standing in
front of him.

“Is Charlie okay?” Italy muttered, practically voiceless, and brought a hand down on Arthur’s but
didn’t try to pry his touch off.

“I don’t know why he fell, but-” Arthur chanced a quick look back and there were Charlie and
Scorpius talking in fast whispers the same way the two nations were. Professor Malfoy hovered over
the children before glancing off somewhere. Arthur looked again, and he saw Headmistress
McGonagall at her throne-like seat behind the undisturbed head table, standing there with her head
leaning forward trying to see what had happened. He didn’t care much about what silently passed
between professors and looked back at his friend. “Why did you try that spell? Creevey hasn’t.” Not
just anyone could pull a patronus out of nowhere.

“I saw it.” Italy looked straight at him and- just the way his voice fell until it could have just been his
tongue and teeth moving together behind his lips. The nation looking out through the boy’s pale
brown eyes was enough to make the words seem real without his actual voice to move them. “I saw
it.” Watching him repeat the same statement helped Arthur understand why he had to just stand there
in front of his friend as Italy’s gaze broke away focused on nothing again, both of them silent and
trying to understand.

“It was- it was just this ghostly, ghastly thing!” And Charlie, bless his rambunctious spirit, was quick
to fill the relative silence on their end of the hall with his own description of events. “I don’t even
know what it was! It didn’t look like a head or an arm per-say but it was just awful! I’ve never been
so scared in my life! And then I hit the floor!”

“I can’t say that I…” Professor Malfoy seemed stumped for a ruling, standing there over the third
years and a few underclassmen who’d lingered to watch and were now crowding around the
Professor as Arthur led Italy back into the folds of the group. “I didn’t honestly see anything, but
what I am sure of was seeing your feet leaving the platform before his did, Mister Higgs.”

“What!?”

“Oh- Professor I don’t think…” Italy put up a weak argument that was silenced just by having
Professor Malfoy turn around and give them a look with both pale brows raised high over his wide
forehead. “I mean- I saw something too.”
“You were surprised, Mister Vargas, and Mister Higgs lost his nerve.” The professor broke things down simply and Arthur appreciated the care that went into the explanation, even if he wasn’t pleased with the ruling. “Since you both swear by it then of course I’ll take your word on the matter and give a thorough go over the platform before the fourth years arrive, but rules are rules, gentlemen. Congratulations, Miss Flint and Mister Vargas, I’m sure you’ll both do Slytherin proudly tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Professor!” Gloria Flint was approximately seven kinds of pleased as Professor Malfoy excused himself to answer a queer look from Professor McGonagall at the head of the hall. As soon as his back was turned she marched straight up to Italy. Of course, that meant she rudely pushed Arthur out of her way to get to him. He rolled his eyes and was too used to her abuse to bother being flustered by it anymore. “Honestly, I’ve never seen such a miserable look on a winner’s face before, what did Kirkland go and say to you to make you so upset?”

He didn’t expect Italy to snap.

“Why do you have to treat him like that?” After his barely-there voice a moment earlier Arthur saw Gloria’s shocked eyes widen in front of him before he heard the rest of what Italy suddenly had to say. “Arthur’s my best friend, my closest friend. Apologize to him for that or don’t speak to me again: I’m sick of it.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Was it worth it to admire Flint’s backbone? Possibly, given the half-step back she took at Italy’s fast, defeated words as Arthur noticed the grave look stressing the other nation’s face. He looked like he needed to sit down and take a rest, but instead of crumbling in the wake of his sudden declaration, Flint stood her ground. “What’s gotten into you, being so rude all of the sudden?”

“You pushed him and then spoke poorly of him, I said apologize.”

“You should be the one to apologize! Speaking to me like this!”

“Oi! Oi that’s enough!” Gloria was a proud girl and Italy was an exhausted, stressed adult hammering against his own disguise, but Charles Higgs was still bigger and louder than both of them as he stormed right up, gusto restored after his fright and fall and he muscled his way straight between them. “Not in front of the whole school you two. Save it for the tournament and don’t go taking it out on each other either!” He placed one hand on Italy’s shoulder and showed his palm to Flint so she wouldn’t try stepping forward, and this was about when Arthur noticed that Scorpius had temporarily broken away from the group to fetch Italy’s wand and was now holding it, stunned by the clash almost unfolding in front of them.

“I wasn’t taking anything out, I was just asking what was wrong!” Gloria’s voice hit such a shrill note at the end of her statement that she spun hard on her heel and stomped away. Finnick was a breath behind her with a poisonous stare over her shoulder before the two of them exited the great hall together. Italy pulled both hands up and covered his face, shaking his head slowly.

“That wasn’t like me, I’m sorry.” He mumbled the words under his breath and the remaining third years crowded up to him, Arthur making a shooing gesture at a first year duo who were giggling and watching too closely until they noticed him looking at him. A second year was there to help grab one of the underclassmen and drag them back to the benches to wait for the fourth years to come in and begin their rounds.

“This just means we all know who needs his beauty sleep from now on, eh, Vargas?” Charlie’s good spirit was indomitable and, although his laughter was a little weak, he still tried it. “I don’t know what came over me to make me give up ground like that, but as long as you do better tomorrow I
promise not to give you hell over it.”

“Please don’t. It’s going to be hard enough speaking to my brother tomorrow.” A gasp went through the other three students, which earned Arthur another punch on the arm from Scorpius when he didn’t look nearly as shocked or aghast.

“Enough with the hitting!” He was quite sick of it!

“You know he’s coming?”

“Of course I know already! I knew yesterday!”

“Well why? Why is he coming?” Ellie was busy asking questions while Arthur wondered why he was in so much trouble for no reason! “You aren’t in some manner of trouble, are you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. I asked him to come this year.” This was all very confusing for their friends as Italy finally pulled his hands down from his face and took his wand back from Scorpius. Arthur really hoped he was the only one to notice the shake in Italy’s hand as he stuffed the rod back up his sleeve, nevermind the unnaturally pale complexion of his face. He wanted to ask out loud if Italy was alright, but knew the other nation would only lie for the children’s sake and hope they hadn’t noticed anything except his obvious temper. “Sorry, Charlie. Maybe next year?”

“Next year for sure, or duelling club next week!”

Forced cheer was better than no cheer, and when Italy forced an exhausted smile for their friends Arthur stepped in to give him a bit of relief.

“That’s enough for now, let’s put the little princeling down for a nap.” He got a suspicious glare from Italy for that and then a groan from Scorpius.

“I thought we said we were going into Hogsmeade today? If Harper spots me in the common room I’m liable to get another lecture about snitch-catching drills for next year.”

“Addy and I wanted new parchment and quills from town too.” Well then Scorpius and Ellie could go and make a date of it: the words Arthur Kirkland was wise enough not to say.

“If I don’t have at least two bottles of Butterbeer to give Tom tomorrow he’ll turn me into a frog and throw me in the lake.” But then there was Charlie to swing the vote, and give Arthur and Italy a convenient out.

“You three go down then.” It was the simplest way of making everybody reasonably happy. “This big baby has to go sulk somewhere, and if I don’t get my Arithmancy done I’ll be crying the number forty-two in my sleep.”

“Oh God, not again!” Charlie cried. “I can’t handle another sleepless night!”

“Scorpius, do you think we can pass by Myrtle’s Toilet before we go?” Ellie asked. “I want to ask her about what Charlie and Feli saw.”

“I’m not going in, but yes we can walk that way: I’ll wait.” Which meant that would free the two nations to go down to the dungeons, the fastest route being in the opposite direction from Moaning Myrtle’s toilet.

They were able to easily detach themselves from the others who were shortly joined by their Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw friends, and escaped down the opposite corridor before Baker even got
through his first question about what could have thrown off a skilled duellist like Vargas.

They walked quickly down a flight of steps and took a right turn past a suit of armor that occasionally waved to students who looked in need of cheering up. The squeak of its wrist joint followed them down another staircase and through a wide arch that signalled a deep slope and a slippery descent into the green and silver-lit dungeons.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Arthur waited until they seemed safe and alone enough in the half-light before saying anything.

“I do, I just want to make sure no one can hear us.” Italy finally had his voice back, but he wasn’t walking at his full height or acting like he could choose between leading or following. It was a stupid, sentimental thing on Arthur’s part, but it was dark and no one was around them, so he reached out and grabbed the other nation’s hand.

He didn’t expect Italy to stop walking, but that didn’t make his reaction a bad thing because he also, almost desperately, curled his fingers around Arthur’s and squeezed just hard enough that it wouldn’t hurt, just stay firm.

“What did you see?” He asked, aware of what Italy’d already said about getting somewhere private, but he gave a tug on his hand and made Italy shuffle around and face him. He was staring down again, lips parted and breathing slowly through his mouth like he was short of breath from the brisk walk. “I know you want to wait but Charlie’s going to go telling anyone who cares to listen, so answer me that much: what did you see?”

“It’s not about what I saw, Arthur.” To compensate for being asked to speak outside the safety of the boy’s locked dormitory, Italy stepped closer to him so that, even though his voice was working just fine again after his harsh scare, he didn’t have to raise it above a whisper for Arthur to hear him. “I barely saw anything, really. A bit of smoke maybe, just a blue afterimage no higher than your ankle. I don’t know what it was but- it’s not about what I saw.”

“You heard something again, didn’t you?” Italy didn’t answer, he just nodded heavily, like his head was full of stones and hard thoughts too difficult to carry. “Why is it affecting you this much? You’ve been hearing things since we got back from Christmas: scattered words and not ‘really real’ voices. Just tell me and we can discuss it properly once we reach the dormitory.”

“It said ‘you can’t kill me.’” The sudden leap into Italian meant Arthur was long and slow in understanding the words that hit him in the face, but he still had Italy’s firm grip on his hand to help pull him along. As he slowly, uncomfortably put together the sounds he’d heard with the meanings he’d learned, Arthur felt his eyes dancing off the murky stones around them and told himself the cold sensation running up his spine was just an effect of the dank air, not his subconscious warning him that they were being watched.

“Kill me? I-”

“No, Arthur…” His eyes were brought back to meet Italy’s gaze, his pale brown eyes catching the ambient green light and shining it back in a strange and unfamiliar way. Unfamiliar was something Arthur had stopped feeling around Feliciano at a specific point he couldn’t name. Taking every meal and spending all but one or two hours a day next to him, beds close together and seats no more than an arm’s length or a step away for three long years meant there was almost nothing about Feliciano’s every day form that Arthur wasn’t used to by now. Being taken firmly by the collar of his open black robe was almost as alien as that light, as that unfamiliar glow. “It said, you can’t kill me. You can’t kill me. Listen to my voice, Arthur, it said: non mi puoi uccidere… now do you understand?” Oh God…
Anger.

He was looking at anger.

“It said it in Italian.”

“Yes...” Arthur’s ears were ringing too loudly to know what language the answer came in, he just understood it and let his fingers, slowly, slip free of Italy’s. When Vargas broke eye-contact to glance briefly at something behind them, he returned the favour by gently releasing the hold he had on Arthur’s robes. “And you and I are being watched. Let’s go, we have much to discuss.”

Arthur didn’t argue, he just followed.

He didn’t even dare look back.
There was a lot for Feliciano and England to talk about, and for the first time in months they didn’t have to worry about anyone walking in on them in the boy’s dormitory for at least two, or maybe as much as four hours.

Feliciano put pencil to a sheet of parchment trying to conjure up what he’d seen again, the depressed top of a skull, something black and ragged like hair. It was all rough and half-formed, nothing really substantial to go on.

He opened up his notebook and went through every line he’d written down about the words he’d been sensing, not really hearing. England read them in his language, Feliciano in Italian, and they both pulled out extra parchment trying to mind-map the jumbled phrases together.

“Come this way and maybe look at me?”

“You can’t kill me,” The phrase that stuck, the words that had made him freeze despite centuries of knowing better when in danger. “Why would it say something like that..?”

England had lots of questions for him, and most of them were good ones. Had it been a masculine voice or a feminine one? Had it sounded angry? Frightened? Laughing? When he’d heard it in the past, had it ever come with more than just that shiver? Always down the back of his neck?

Feliciano closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, trying to sort through the frustrated emotions welling up in him when he realized, between England’s questions, that they didn’t have more than a few hours to sort out as much of this as they could before packing it up again until tomorrow.

He wanted Lovino’s presence now more than he had all week, but he still didn’t know what they were supposed to ask each other.

“Alright, well, I’ll just say it because we’re both probably thinking it: are you being haunted?”

Feliciano didn’t like that question. He kept his face down and hands covering his eyes as he made himself try and just answer him.

“I thought you were going to ask if I was hallucinating.”

“If Charlie hadn’t seen it today then I’d be asking that instead, but what do you think?”

Feliciano stayed where he was kneeling on the floor, needing the time to just sit and take a slow, deep breath and then let it out against his wrists. Was it possible?

“How long does it take ghosts to manifest?” He breathed the question slowly and then dropped his hands, flipping through the black book he’d dropped in his own lap and not looking up while waiting for an answer. “On average, I mean.”

“You sleep in his bed, and carry her cross.” Arthur didn’t answer the question, just supported what Feliciano was getting at as he shuffled across the floor behind him, and with a light touch on the back of Feliciano’s head, made him tip his head forward a little more so his hands could brush away his hair and get a look at the back of his neck. Maybe someone had put a curse mark there when he hadn’t been paying attention, but when the soft graze of Arthur’s fingertips passed, he came back around into view with a frown and shook his head. “You’d be a prime candidate for a haunting, especially since there’s nothing marking you where you say you keep getting that feeling.” Just the
weight of the cold silver chain against his skin…

“I’ve been here for three years and it only starts now?” It shouldn’t have taken this long if it was a ghost. Spirits who lingered in this world usually came into their own very quickly, especially if they’d been ripped from their bodies and lives. “I don’t like it.”

“You’re not supposed to like it, but if that is the case then what are we going to do about it?”

“Let the rest of the year pass and see if it follows me back home?” Maybe he could go to the Rosetti family graves and survivors and see if that kind of pilgrimage would be enough. If not, there was always Lovino and Chiara he could go asking. Sicily wasn’t a really a viable option, but his brother would help him once he knew what it was about. And if that was really the answer to his problems then Feliciano didn’t want to voice what that would mean: a fourth year at Hogwarts was practically a guarantee… “Lovino’s probably seen something like this before and can deal with it better than I can anyways.”

“You must have a lot of confidence in him to say that.” Arthur had a smile on his face, a tilt of his blond head and a cheeky little show of teeth like he thought it was funny to make that point.

“His magic is strong enough that he kept our Wizarding population under control for over a thousand years.” Feliciano tried to sound cheerful as he gave the reminder, but there was a sore tension building in his head right behind his left eye. Rubbing his face again slowly, he heard the papers rustling and looked up when, unbidden, Arthur touched him again with a warm hand on Feliciano’s back. The slow, soothing rub across his shoulders and down his spine felt better than it should have, but it was just good to have a friend.

“How long am I going to have to wait to get the full story about you two and the war, hmm?” If only his friend wouldn’t keep asking questions like that.

“Quite a while, I promise.” Nothing was going right today, he’d have to figure out what to do about the duelling tournament tomorrow after failing to lose his match, and there was this huge mess spread in front of them to figure out too. In a way he was happy to be the one dealing with a haunting, it was much better than having it be Scorpius, or someone weaker like Ellie.

Exhausted by his own thoughts, Feliciano took advantage of the quiet and the solitude to just close his eyes and drop his head sideways onto England’s shoulder. There was a dry laugh from his friend but no move to shake him off.

“Your temper’s settled down then.”

“I’m frustrated but I just- I don’t want to be angry right now.” He hated being angry… He didn’t like that burn in his skin or the ringing in his ears. He didn’t like having people take one look at him and step out of his way. If it meant having an escape from his own temper, then Feliciano was content to just hide against Arthur’s shoulder and think of seeing Lovino again tomorrow, wincing when the tension in his skull didn’t feel any better despite the closeness.

No…

And then he clenched his teeth and wrapped his own arms around himself slowly, feeling Arthur’s other hand come up and touch his shoulder.

‘This way…!’

“You’re hearing it again, aren’t you?”
“You can’t hear it?” He grunted, fingers grasping up handfuls of the sweatshirt he was wearing from home as he closed his eyes a little tighter and shuffled closer on his knees. “Or sense it? There’s gotta be something—”

“Vargas-!” The nice touch on his back and shoulder both changed and shook him quickly, Feliciano’s eyes unwillingly cracking open as Arthur as England pressed his hand in the middle of Feliciano’s chest and pushed to help him sit up straighter.

He saw a faint wisp of something blue and his awareness flooded back to him, because as soon as he blinked it was gone.

“What was that?”

“Get up, we’re going to find out.”

It took a wand wave to clean up everything they’d spread across the floor: parchment sheets with maps of the school, locations of paintings and lists of artist names, the fragments of the whispers Feliciano had been hearing and the large scrolls of parchment covered in pencil and quill marks trying to link the fragments together. Feliciano grabbed his book bag out of habit. He barely had a chance to make sure he had his wand before they both charged out into the dorm hall.

There was a lick of blue light that stood out against the ambient green of Slytherin house and they both hit the stairs up into the common room at a run.

By now the only house year left to do their tournament preliminaries were the seventh years, so the common room itself was almost completely silent with only a few scattered fifth and sixth years studying hard in corners for their higher level NEWT and OWL exams. The two third years were able to cross the room without getting more than a glance, and no one seemed mystified or interested in floating blue lights.

‘Now-’

As soon as the common room door ground its way open, they saw it again, and England gave a shallow gasp next to him when they both thought they saw the grizzly thin outline of finger-bones vanishing into the wall. There was no time to ask each other, they just went at a run around the corner of the dungeon hall. They followed the memorized sweeps, turns, and staircases to get on the far sides of the walls they watched the light repeatedly vanish through.

‘Come…!’

Feliciano’s shrunken legs were burning when they rounded another corner and looked up with dismay as the light flared once and whispered away though the vaulted ceiling. If he hadn’t had England right next to him, he would have told himself now he really was just seeing things.

“What’s it saying to you?” England panted next to him, then gave him a touch on the arm signalling they should go left and find the closest staircase, not straight and double back around through the damp corridors.

“We’re already doing what it wants: following.” God, was it even safe to consider chasing strange magic through the castle? He couldn’t even tell himself if he was hearing words in Italian or just that un-voice tugging at his soul.

They went straight up a long, shallow flight of stairs and hit the faded daylight of the higher floors. Feliciano grabbed England’s hand when he started twisting the wrong way towards the second floor instead of past the gargoyle statue to get to the castle’s main foyer. They stopped when the corridor
opened up into the wide, echoing space.

This vaulted chamber was the school’s main artery. It flowed from front door to seventh floor in a wide, snaking fashion, intersecting with almost every major hallway at some point or another. Not so far away up the carved stairs came the rumble and roar of hundreds of students watching their seventh-years compete, and just as close were the wide open doors to Hogwarts. As it was Saturday in May, there were few restrictions on where students cold roam, and the sunlight bathing the yellow stones beckoned them.

It also gave the nations their one and only warning that they and their query were not alone.

Feliciano saw her bright pink hat loitering between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor’s great point-keeping hourglasses. He stopped England from charging out and giving their position away by accident, suffering as the blue magic burned slowly at the corner of one of the great doors.

The magic didn’t look like anything, just rolling blue gas and the waver of flames the same colour and ethereal in their silent motions. It was just sitting there, right under the witch’s nose, and Huntington didn’t notice it.

“Yes, now hurry up!” She was saying, and Feliciano wanted to wail. A trio of Ravenclaws sprinted past them from the front doors to catch the seventh year preliminaries. The day was fading and the Hogsmeade carriages were returning. Feliciano couldn’t breathe easy around Huntington on a good day, there was no way they could run the wrong way out of the school past her without being stopped, questioned, and dragged away.

He looked at England, pleading.

“You have to distract her,” he whispered.

“Are you mental?” Not now, England, don’t argue about this. “I’m going with you.”

“Neither of us are going with her standing right there!” England hushed him shrewdly, his young face pulled tight with the conflict before them. Feliciano couldn’t lose this. “Three years, Arthur.” Three years and finally, finally something. But England hesitated and Feliciano almost burst from it, both of them clutching their wands.

“Can you still see it?”

“Arthur yes,”

“Fine.” He relented, finally. “But as soon as I’m done with her, I’m coming after you.” Feliciano shook his head.

“You won’t have a trail to lead you and it could go anywhere. Wait for me in the library, and if I’m not back by dinner—”

“Then I’ll tell McGonagall.” Good. “If it goes off the grounds then just be careful.”

“What’s past them?” He asked. They were running out of time and Feliciano heard footsteps from the empty hall: she was coming! “Hurry!”

“Nothing!” England hissed back, “Nothing you or I can’t, handle, just be careful!”

“Go!”
“Vargas!” England suddenly shouted, startling him and tearing into the main foyer. “Feliciano you get back here! You wanker, piece of shit, I’ll kill you!” Well that- that... 

“Mister Kirkland!” Huntington’s voice rung out and Feliciano ducked back behind a suit of armor to hide.

“Which way did he go!” England howled, unseen in the daylight. “I’ll get ‘im! I’ll rip his bloody tongue out and watch him utter that spell again!”

“Arthur, calm down, dear! Come, tell me what-” But Arthur yelled wordlessly at the American and his voice started to echo and fade as he tore off down another passage way. “Kirkland!” And Huntington’s followed.

Feliciano was free.

Out, out into the brisk May evening with the sun tinted orange above the rolling green hillside. The school grounds ended with the black curtain of the Forbidden Forest and the same trees also shrouded the way down to Hogsmeade.

A faded blue light tumbled briefly over the grass, and Feliciano tore after it.

He went at a blind run at first but then had to think smarter than that, shoes hitting the dry grass and pounding the ground before the land sloped with the mountain’s face and he was running parallel to the face of the woods. The forest was black and spread around Hogwart’s north and western sides like a blanket at a person’s feet, Hogsmeade to the south west where the forest thinned out before spreading along the valley to the next mountain.

It was forbidden to students, meaning there wasn’t a clear and easy path from the door straight into the brambles and thickets. He had to run alongside the banned trees and let his senses tell him when he was too close to the boulders scattered across the edge of Hogwart’s formal grounds. They acted like a trip-wire, something to set off a spell back in the castle and bring a professor, probably Professor Malfoy for Slytherin, after him.

But the barrier wasn’t perfect. Feliciano checked back towards the castle for sight of the green houses, and as soon as the glass roofs and walls glittered in the dusk he cut further down towards the tree-line.

The land sloped down here and the grass gave way to gravel and scrub, the gentle murmur of water signalling where one of the many run-off pipes from inside the castle spilled. He was on the opposite side of the mountain from the lake, and slowed his pace down just enough to bring both hands up in front of him as he ran and collect a bit of heat between his palms.

It was just a simple barrier spell, an enchantment meant to deter students from unwittingly wandering into danger. He couldn’t hear the voice calling him anymore and when he looked up at the forest there was no sign of the blue light, but as soon as Feliciano found the break in the land where the pipe came out of the hill and the landscape was puckered around it, he jumped feet-first down the small ravine and spread his hands like a breast-stroke through water.

There was a sizzle and crack of two magical forces connecting. With a gentle wave of heat from the tips of his fingers up along his arms and shoulders, Feliciano shot straight through the weak point of the barrier and hit the ground in a fast roll on the other side.

He only stopped for a few seconds to look back up at the looming face of Hogwart’s school, panting from the added weight of making his body perform wandless magic on top of running the way he
hadn’t tried to in months. He couldn’t treat this body like that, and for a few more moments he looked down at himself and wondered if he couldn’t take the charm off…

No. If he did that he’d get sick and then he’d have to put it on again in less than an hour- which would make him even more sick. It wasn’t worth it, nevermind his clothes.

Just like it wasn’t worth getting caught if someone looked out a window and saw him crouched there, because he was pretty sure that was Gryffindor tower perched on this side of the school over his head. Instead of waiting for something bad to happen, he quickly scampered from the open field up to the knee-high grass and rising shrubs. He left footprints behind him, but shot between the trees before breaking his sprint and turning every which way, eyes and senses fanning out for what he needed.

The forest didn’t smell right. Yes it was earthy and musty, but it didn’t smell right. It was a Scottish forest, not an Italian one: the trees were wrong, the shrubs all yellow and black. He looked up at the plants he’d been refreshed and reminded about by Longbottom’s endless lessons and stuck one hand down into the book-bag still slung over his shoulder and resting at his hip.

He found a small knife from the same Herbology class and turned around again to peer deeper into the forest. He couldn’t see anything in the creeping twilight except red sky and black trees, the wind blowing cold and cutting straight through the green body of the sweatshirt Lovino had sent him from home. He touched the Italian football crest over his heart just to remind him that his flag was there, and then stepped carefully over a thick bush that cut at the rough blue denim protecting his legs.

No sign of his guide.

He looked at the ground instead then, counting points on leaves and hurrying from tree to tree because he could feel the daylight slipping away like the feeling from his cold hands. He found two familiar herbs in the undergrowth and scraped up a dead heather branch no longer than his hand, a bit of twine from his potion’s kit binding the leaves and wood together before he pulled out his wand.

“Where are you?” He asked softly, not needing the word for the fire charm that brought a small red flame out the end of his wand and caught the bundle between his fingers. He only let it burn for a few moments, enough to make sure the thick branch caught, then put away his wand and knelt on the forest floor to blow the embers out. “Lead me, and I will follow.”

One more big breath and the cloud of smoke alighted off the bundle in his hand, going further than his lungs could push it and gathering volume as it sped away like a slow, smoldering comet. The red daylight was already giving way to darker shades of indigo and he regretted not grabbing his robe or a proper jacket before fleeing the dorm, but he’d just have to bear with the creeping cold and the persistent wind as the smoke kept going and he hurried to keep up.

He could already feel it: that sensation that someone was watching him. As he crunched and jostled his way past dark trees and over broken branches, he didn’t care about noise, just speed.

His reward, just when it seemed like the spell he’d cast was about to die, was the distant, unnatural spill of blue light over the next heavily wooded, darkening hill…

Arthur made up excuses and horrors as he ran through Hogwarts, getting Italy into progressively more trouble along the way. Finally, Huntington and Creevey finally caught him and made Arthur
calm down so he could speak to them. This body was so easily moved to tears that they were only fake in the emotional sense, and he scrubbed the drippings away on his jumper sleeve to keep up the appearance of an overwhelmed boy.

Huntington took ten points from Slytherin for Italy setting a nightmare on a cat-napping Arthur, but the nation howled at the house injustice until Creevey hushed and reversed the decision. Arthur lied that his traitorous friend must have been on his way to hide in the Music room, and guessed rightly that neither instructor would let him continue his chase.

Creevey gave him a chocolate frog to settle him, and Huntington affectionately showed him back to the dungeons. She followed him all the way to Slytherin itself, and Arthur had to hiccup and ask her to kindly not listen to him give the magic password. She left after a few more kind words, but Arthur failed to calm his blemished face before walking right inside to see his friends sitting about in the common room. The boy stalled and the nation cursed his poor luck.

“Arthur!”

“Blimey, Kirkland, you look like you’ve had the run of it.” Charlie was almost as sympathetic as Ellie, but better tended to humour. “Was Professor Firenze after you agian? And where’d you get chocolate!”

“No, no centaurs,” Arthur said, stuffing the last wriggling bite of the frog in his mouth where Charlie could not seize it. He’d never catch up to Italy if he had to convince their friends nothing was amiss. “Bit of a row with Vargas; stupid nonsense, football’s all it is.” A subject that would- would...

No centaurs... oh no- oh no.

“Kirkland?”

It- it dawned on him so incredibly slowly. It felt like his head was about to lift off his shoulders and his ears pop at the same time, that was how anxious and wrong the realization was. He didn’t even feel the textbook leave his grasp or hear the inkwell shatter on the stone floor, and Arthur certainly didn’t see the upperclassman stand up and demand to know what had just gotten into him, or why he looked so utterly petrified.

“Centaurs…” he repeated the word so slowly, and he wondered how in God’s name he’d forgotten the honest terror and complete helplessness of being trapped in too small of a body on a black October night two years ago, chased down and nearly trampled by a beast that was only one of many. “The forest is full of centaurs-!”

He’d told him it was safe- he’d told Vargas it was safe to go into the woods. He’d told Italy a foreign nation and automatic enemy of Scotland’s territorial centaur herds that there was nothing of serious consequence hiding in those woods.

The sound of the common room door opening was what got Arthur beating the floor with his feet as he ran, arms pumping twice as Scorpius yelled for him to come back and he was abruptly slammed into the black figure that came walking in through the open door.

Arthur wouldn’t have stopped moving the Prefect hadn’t grabbed him with a defensive yelp and they both hit the floor.

“Kirkland, what are you-!” he pushed both hands down on the student’s chest and heard the boy gag, rolling off of him quickly and almost hitting his back on the edge of the door before digging his toe into the floor and pushing off like a sprinter. He felt someone try to grab him but whipped around
the corner and down the hall with Charlie bellowing at him to come back.

Somehow he knew what was going to happen and yet he still tried to outrun the jinx he felt come off someone’s wand. There was a flash of pink light behind him that reflected off the dank stones. Arthur made himself leap forward and tucked his head down for that last bit of distance before the leg-lock curse caught up with him.

It didn’t hurt, but there was the jarring, balance thrown sensation of his ankles and knees seizing up and binding together, his roll coming to a sloppy end with him on his knees and both hands flat on the stones, but he only stayed like that until he could flip himself over and draw his wand.

“What’s gotten into-!?” Charles Higgs was half-way to him when Arthur drew a fast criss-cross in the air and then boxed it in, a larger than life version of the same design painting itself as a white trail of starlight across the full dimension of the corridor, erecting a wall of light that blocked the rest of what Charlie had to say even after the brilliance faded.

Arthur had the end of his wand aimed down at his paralyzed legs to work the counter-charm before Higgs physically walked into the barrier and then realized what he’d done. Both hands up and pounding on it, Arthur couldn’t hear him and only had the time to throw back a sorry look at his two friends and the other baffled Slytherins peering out of the common room before he stood back up, shook his head, and ran away.

For Hogwarts’s sake, he ran as fast as the damned charm on his wrist would let him.

The sun was almost gone and it wasn’t enough like summer for Scotland’s forest to hang on to the daytime warmth. Feliciano climbed the next hill slowly, eyes moving between the shadowed ground and the glimmering light leading him forward, careful not to trip or go sliding back down through the trees.

It was slow, hard going as the daylight drained away. The mountains carved the sunset down and sunk the forest past twilight into full darkness by the time he conquered the hill and then looked for his next checkpoint.

He almost fell with the one-handed effort to pull out his wand again for a bit of light. Feliciano had to stop walking completely, breath beginning to mist in the cooling air, and glance up at the slightly brighter sky as he saw more clouds beginning to roll in from somewhere across the highlands. When he looked back down again he saw the blue lamp light hovering up and down in a slow orbit between the trees. He reached a hand out for the nearest trunk to help steady himself as he slid one foot through the bed of pine-needles and descended towards it.

The ghost lamp didn’t have walls to vanish through anymore, but it ducked behind trees, slipped under fallen logs, and led him in what felt like circles with only his wand to protect him. It gave him the sick sense that, while maybe not being followed, he was definitely being watched. Hadn’t England once told him never to enter the forest?

Arthur would have said something when asked. That was the confidence Feliciano needed to keep walking, eyes scanning the trees and senses as open as his ears for any rustling or scary noises. When the ground was level he tried to soften his own footsteps, and when it was steep he maintained the path of least resistance.

He tried not to step on anything, especially not if it looked alive. At one point there was a stagnant
brook full of moss that, in the creeping dark, began to glow green and gold when he approached. Feliciano detoured to find a path of boulders to scramble and jump to so he didn’t step on the fungus. If this took much longer then England was going to have to take his warning seriously and go to McGonagall, but maybe it wouldn’t come to that... Could he aparate from the forest back to the castle, maybe? He hadn’t tried that kind of magic in so long...

This body wasn’t holding up well either. First the poor night of sleep, then the duels and the anxiety of trying to figure out what was going on, and now this late-night trek were running his energy into the ground. Maybe he should have taken the charm off?

He was just reaching through his shirt to palm and grasp at the cold metal when the sleepy light he’d been following did something new.

It was far ahead of him, at least fifteen yards in the black night and that meant he kept losing sight of it, but when he looked up this time he almost thought it was closer than before, not further away, and he picked up his pace a little across the muddy forest floor. It looked so much bigger than a few moments before too, the orb of blue light expanding from a handful of mist to something half as tall as Feliciano himself.

He pushed past another tree, startled by the tack of sap sticking to his palm. He gave it a wary sniff as he kept walking, intensely aware of how easily he could be poisoned and how badly this body would suffer trying to fight it off. It just smelled like pine-sap, but he avoided rubbing it on his jeans and didn’t stop pressing forward.

As he walked, the nation could almost hear something at the very edge of his awareness. It rambled and begged, reaching for his attention like a lost ship at sea:

‘This way.... This way this way.... This way this way this way this way this way this way this way this way...’

But there was something, somewhere, not quite within him but not quite without, that answered: No, no, no, no, no...

His options were to either go back and continue the charade with nothing learned, or keep pressing on. It was a false fork in the road, there was really only one choice he could make. Feliciano wasn’t going to be prodded and poked along when he could willingly march ahead and let his instincts fight continue their tug-o-war until it brought him a result.

The ghost lamp had stopped. It was burning brighter now than it had in the castle, hovering there a few feet above the ground in a very small clearing between the trees. It was a glade free of grass or bushes and walled in by the tall, thick trunks of ancient black trees, the forest floor barren and blanketed with grey pine-needles. The air was so cold when Feliciano stepped into the glade that he saw his breath form a cloud in the bright wash of blue light, his fingers numb and the cold creeping across his shoulders, radiating through the cross and chain hanging around his neck.

On the far side of the clearing there was a small, gnarled black tree that was completely dwarfed by the mightier timbers around it. It looked like a child had taken its branches and trunk and twisted them together like modelling clay, then left the job half-done with bulbous growths and tangled roots clawing at the ground like it was in pain. Feliciano didn’t have to come much closer to understand it: he could taste the metallic tang on his tongue from powerful, latent magic.

And it was magic, Feliciano concluded from the deformity rising ten feet tall in front of him to claw helplessly for a sky it would never reach, that had been very dark in purpose when cast.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no...
The tall ghost lamp sank into the ground now, Feliciano keeping his distance as the misty qualities of the light were overwhelmed by the flickering, burning after-image of blue fire. From the point where the original lamp sank into the needles, two arms of blue flame spread out to circle the tree as a knee-high barrier, giving him enough light to douse his wand, but setting his mind on high-alert. Despite what he was seeing he couldn’t otherwise sense anything, and to him that seemed like a very good reason to start worrying.

_Run, run, run, run, run-_ run where? He was already here.

When the original lamp reappeared under the twisted hollow of the tree’s gnarled roots, Feliciano slowly held a hand out to the flaming barrier in front of him, palm high over the blue light feeling for any heat. There was only a cooling sensation against his skin and, with a slow, deep breath in, he stepped forward.

It felt like walking through a wall of snow, or maybe a splash of brisk cold water. He wasn’t harmed or upset by the feeling, but looked back through the blue glare at the forest he could barely see anymore. All the colour was gone and the brilliance formed an iridescent dome over his head, blocking out the trees and covering the silence of the forest with the murmur of restless magic.

‘Here, here, here, here, here, here…’

It wasn’t just a sense of being watched anymore, there was urgency and a pleading keen to the half-sensed voice radiating through the blue energy. The fact that a simple ghost could conjure up this much light and sensation… was it really a ghost? Was it really just a ghost?

“I’m here.” He almost jumped at his own voice, the words coming out so loud when he hadn’t meant to shout or maybe the forest was just so quiet that anything above a whisper was too loud. “Show yourself!”

‘Closer… closer, closer, closer, closer, closer-’

“Not until you answer me!” The whispering stopped, and- “Tell me your name!”

The ring of fire went out. The blue light vanished because he hadn’t made the second demand in English like the first: he’d spoken clearly and Feliciano had done it in Italian.

He’d been chilly before but the cold clamped down on him as his eyes widened in the pitch black that swallowed his senses whole. His wand came out with a practised motion, and with a fast, almost desperate swing of the long almond-wood rod over his head, he cast another light charm and let it hover in the air around him as a fairy ring of white light.

That gentle glow struck the ghastly white cheeks and sunken eyes of a face, and Feliciano screamed.

‘Kill me.’ When he screamed he fell back, breaking the light and dropping his wand trying to catch himself on his hands: his ankle struck and tangled over something that hadn’t been on the flat, even floor of the forest a moment earlier. His eyes were blind, heart slamming in his throat and sending the blood screaming through his ears as his senses flared so hard he felt his skin flashing hot from the magic looking for any route to escape through him. If he decided to run, Feliciano would push this body at a sprint from here to the castle walls.

It took him until nothing approached or made a grab for him in the dark to hear what the floating face had said. It took him until after he heard his language and the word that carried the name of humanity’s highest crime that he realized he’d seen a young man’s face hovering in the night.

“What… What’s your name?” He asked again, softly this time as he pulled one leg in and planted his
foot on the ground, moving into a crouch as his fingers fumbled over the needles for his wand. He kept his thoughts and his voice in Italian, sinking into the familiar forms and rhythms... "Tell me your name." Where was his wand?

‘Here…’ the half-voice whispered again and the pale, pale blue light of the ghost lamp flickered in the darkness. If there was a moon tonight then it was blocked by the clouds that were still rolling in over the treetops. The blue light crawled up from under the outline of the trees twisted roots again, creeping like slow-burning embers from a dying fire seeking new life.

Feliciano’s grasping search ended without his wand, but he wasn’t allowed to break eye-contact with the tree yet to summon it to him. Instead, he had to watch as the blue light extended outward from the tree like a small, searching hand that scraped at the needles within the root’s tangled hold and vanished. The hand looked almost life-like, ghostly and illuminated by its own unnatural glow, but the trailing body of a black sleeve edged in banded green and silver held his attention.

Run! Run! Run! Run! Run!

It was all blue because it was without real colour: it was like staring into Moaning Myrtle’s black eyes and her turquoise skin, the fan and fall of her lavender hair over the dark navy blue of a robe that had once been black. Feliciano didn’t have a logical reason why his mind told him he saw green when everything was shades of evanescent blue, but that was what he felt to be true, and that was why he stopped looking for his wand and crept towards the tree instead...

‘Here. Here. Right here…’ Half-words, not-sounds, the confused hum of Italian where there was no language at all, only a feeling. A sensation as real as the prick and itch of dry needles and gritty wet soil that gave way under his fingers and ripped, and tore, and opened unwillingly in the darkness. The smell of rotten leaves and the bite of tiny rough branches pinching his palms made it all worse, and the cold that rose out of the ground as he silently tugged and ripped it free in layers gave him shivers with teeth clenched.

And the ghost hand tried to help, it guided his fingers down further, it lit the way around a gnarled root until finally, with a gasp he didn’t hear because it wasn’t really there…

His hands found something that was wet and musty, but too firm to fall apart like packed earth and old leaf-litter. He felt down along the narrow edge that bent but didn’t break when he pushed on it, and felt the straight edge of something that came to a deliberate corner.

He dug further: it wasn’t very deep, a few inches below the surface and almost half a foot across. He felt the feathered edge of a book’s wet pages and stopped trying to rip and pull, focusing on getting down until the sensation of the thick front cover was met by the firmness of the back and the soil packed down beneath it. The cover was hard and thick, the pages made of something thick enough that they didn’t shred at his prying touch, and Feliciano kept digging with his hands hurting and bleeding in the filth, breaths coming in short, hot pants now trying to keep the cold at bay. The spirit’s light was the only thing left to guide him, but finally, with a shuddered sound of relief from his own thirsty lips, he found the other side of the book, felt down along the wet spine, and gripped it hard.

‘Can’t kill me…’ It took three large pulls and a lot of ripping and twisting, but finally the ground under the tree gave up its hold. He heard the spirit breathe over him when the book finally lurched free and he pulled it straight up against his chest, heedless of the mud and grime sticking to its damp form and getting all over him. He was already filthy and late and wrongfully off school property on a forbidden tract of land. A little bit more dirt wasn’t going to get him in any extra trouble, and he just sat there panting trying to understand the hard effort to get it out.
“And get away with it,” the nation agreed with the spirit. “Show me your face.” He felt short of breath and finally tasted the copper trailing down his throat with the words. Every breath was saturated with magic that wasn’t his as he looked up at the grizzly form of the tormented tree. His hands tried to pry the heavy book off his own chest so he could look at it, but despite it not being all that big, it resisted. “One more time, just show me your face.”

‘Can’t kill me... kill me... kill me...’ He’d heard that already but now Feliciano felt it. He felt the word and their meaning, the accusation and the corruption that meant he couldn’t answer back, only listen to the whispers that felt stronger now than they had before, the stain of anger dripping down the half-heard voice. ‘Tried before... failed again... can’t kill me again... can’t kill me... can’t kill me...’

“Show me your face!” Feliciano shouted, scared that the light would die again but instead the blue just stole his attention back to the roots of the tree. The roots that felt closer to him now and tangled higher above the ripped up black hole he’d dug between them, the hole that felt deeper and wider and somehow under instead of in front of him. The empty grave for the book resting like a slab of concrete against his chest, holding him down. The blue flames licked at the mangled tree, creeping up slowly along twisted bark and hissing with things he couldn’t grasp or understand.

Run! Run! RUN! RUN! RUN! RUN! He couldn’t! He refused! The book and his horror held Feliciano down in the grave and he had to make sense of it! He had to understand!

He had to try! He forced his eyes open as his ears strained for what they couldn’t hear. That other sense, that something that wasn’t quite his nationhood but was tethered to his immortal soul just the same, opened up and spread itself as thinly as it could to cover as great a range as possible. He could feel tears forming in his eyes as they dried out and began to blur in the intense light, the black forest pushed away by the hideous blanket of blue light twisting and surging higher up the trunk of the grappled tree and flying from its branches like hellish leaves. He could barely hear over the whispering, the hissing, the insensible and untouchable, the cold numbing his skin while the wrongness soaked through his bones and struck a hollow, restless burn...

He had to know, he had to establish which anger was his and what belonged to the spirit that was too strong to be a child’s ghost. What had they done to his child? He was here now in front of Feliciano whispering such dangerous, deadly words...

‘Vengeance!!’ It was through the burning and the bleeding that he began to see it: the face of the spirit that had led him here, the one who’d been watching him for weeks and taunting him for longer. He saw the black robes whipped with familiar bands of green and silver, the height and breadth of shoulder that marked a warlock freshly matured and ready to take the next leap ahead. A straight chin and dark ringlets of black hair, straight nose and bloodied bowed lips. Eyes that-

“ITALY!”

And then it was gone. The light, the power, the voice, the face.

Marco Rosetti was gone, the darkness overwhelmed, and the panicked scream through the black forest unlocked only one single, overwhelming feeling in Feliciano’s chest:

Vengeance.
Arthur hadn’t bothered to try and thwart the trespass charm, he hadn’t even been clever with his route the way Italy had and cut across the grounds to find the best place to cross from the school into the forbidden forest.

He just ran straight, blasting out the door he could reach the fastest from the dungeons. He didn’t even look at Professor Longbottom when a swirl of scarlet robes and a voice calling after him were both ignored by the mad pace he kept up. Arthur fled across the packed earth of the school gardens and greenhouses. If the Professor thought to follow him, he didn’t catch up.

The trespass charm made a terrible sound when Arthur leapt through it. Cymbals crashed in his ears and there was a starburst of yellow and red light in his eyes that tried to blind and stun him. It was like a toned down, magical flash-bang that made Arthur lose his footing and duck into a roll over the gravel between school and forest. But childish though this body was, the will behind it was England, and England had taken proper grenades in the past and a mystical knock-off only distracted him, not dazed.

He ran straight into the dark trees and let the cold air whip his face, desperately blind and then pulling on something he hadn’t felt in years.

He *apparated.*

His vision blacked out and it felt all at once like his body was being pressed in on all sides, like a bullet squeezing through a barrel too narrow and getting ready to burst with a rain of shrapnel and smoke at any moment.

*Closer to him.* That was the only guiding force Arthur gave his leap and he suffered for it when a sharp pain snagged him by the ear as soon as his feet found forest floor again and he kept up his run. The fluid warmth of his splinched ear lobe stained the shoulder of his shirt before with a swipe of his wand and the scream of more pain, the top rim of his damaged ear was cauterized shut. The deformity would grow back in a few days: that was the stomach-churning conviction Arthur grasped and fed off of as he kicked one foot up onto a fallen log and launched himself again into the air.

Different magic this time, not quite the same but not so different either: disapparation that sent him spiralling straight up into the air as he gave himself a clearer destination this time. In fact, it was almost pristine: *high enough to see him.*

It worked. The black cloak of the forest fell away below him and he saw something in the distance, brilliant and terrifying. Arthur existed in a free-fall high above the trees until gravity inevitably grabbed him and caused his small body to plunge back down towards the forest floor.

*Apparate: to the ground, facing the blue light.* He almost choked on the blinding nausea of the third teleport in a row after as many decades without touching the spell or other magics like it. But he
didn’t give up, and then the darkness let him out again Arthur didn’t even stumble as his foot made contact with the ground in mid-stride and he pumped his arms through the ink black forest.

He didn’t fall because conjuring a white orb of light behind him cast enough brilliance on the forest that, so long as it remained at his side and no more than hip-high, he could see both what was coming and where he was going without losing himself completely in the night.

“VARGAS!” They had to get out of the forest, they had to apparate or run or fly themselves out of these twisted black trees before the herd living in them made a move against either nation. There was no point wondering if the centaurs were aware of the dual trespass: their kind were too in-tune with nature and territory to make that mistake. As soon as Italy had passed into the treeline, he’d probably set he first scouts on his own tail.

Centaurs were not like house elves and ghosts and owls. They had a loyalty to the land which rivalled and complimented the bond between humans and their territories, their regions, their nations. Scottish Centaurs knew Scotland, maybe not by face but they’d know him intrinsically by spirit and soul, and there was no point resenting his brother for that. Arthur had his own English herds he could have spent more time with, even one small friend with a fawn’s back half who visited him on occasion in Kent. There was no use getting angry or upset at Scotland, this wasn’t his fault.

If Arthur had only remembered to utter the word ‘centaurs’ back at the castle door, Italy never would have suggested entering the woods himself, nevermind alone. It would have been a one-way trip up to the Owler to bring Scotland as fast as his stupidly long legs could carry him to Hogwarts. Not this, not a foreign nation traipsing hap-hazardously through sensitive territory to taunt hyper-protective and deeply suspicious members of a race intrinsically bound to Arthur’s brother.

Centaurs didn’t care about politics, they didn’t care about treaties and didn’t acknowledge alliances. Scottish woodlands were Scottish and there for nothing English or Italian was permitted to enter those boundaries. Why else would their own professor have tried to break their legs and run them both out of the castle at the start of term?

But why couldn’t Arthur have only remembered this an hour ago?

He thought he could see it again, that pale blue brilliance forking through the trees and for one terrifying moment, highlighting a horse’s flanks before Arthur lost sight of horns and strong arms in the darkness. He wasn’t sure how close he ultimately passed by however many centaurs were lurking, but when the blue flared up and then died with a wailing keen, Arthur screamed again:

“ITALY!!”

Darkness swept down and it was like a puff of air blowing out Arthur’s candle when his own magic was cancelled out. He almost fell when he aimed his foot down where he’d thought there was level ground and he pitched forward when the terrain dropped into a shallow, treeless bowl.

The only thing he could hear was his own panting and the stumble and thud of his feet over pine-needles, eyes swimming in black and the faded outline of a gnarled tree resting closer than the towering trunks surrounding them. Arthur just kept going forward, hands reaching out in the dark looking for the thirteen year old body he’d thought he’d seen in the brilliance resting on its knees in the mud, but he felt hands reach out and grab him first.

“You-” grab him, as in curl in the front of his shirt and yank him so hard Arthur yelped when his feet left the ground and he was swung around hard. He knew the voice, but he’d never- no, it had been so long since he’d heard it sound like that.
He was ripped forward and around and then shoved with just as much force, his smaller body giving way when he tried stopping the attack but was outdone by a lower centre of gravity that had so much more experience fighting small and fast.

It took Arthur until right now with Italy’s hands going for his throat again to realize how much of an advantage Feliciano had over him if they were going to fight with children’s bodies.

“Stop-!” Except they weren’t supposed to be fighting!

“I trusted you!”

“Italy-”

“I trusted you when they died and you said you’d investigate!” He barely got his arm up to block a strike aimed at his face, taking another one hard in the chest from an open palm that made him stumble and nearly fall. “I trusted you enough that I left to take their bodies home, and two months later you had nothing to show for it because you insisted there was nothing here!” The words slapped him in English only to blunder into Italian and back again, every breath a chance to switch as Arthur dug one foot back and slapped off the hands that tried to force him back again. He jabbed his fist straight forward and heard as much as felt the connection between his knuckles and Italy’s ribs.

“Snap out of it!” He shouted back, heart hammering faster than Arthur could count as he tried reaching out in the midnight looking for the idiot’s shoulders- just to he could grab him and make him see reason! “We haven’t got time for this, Vargas, we have to get back right-!”

He was hit back with something: it felt hot and tasted like wandless magic that scored the side of his face with red flame before vanishing off Italy’s fingertips. Silence swallowed the forest as Arthur’s shocked knees gave out and he sank slowly against the rippled bark of the tree. That hadn’t just happened, Italy knew how to lash out, but not like this…

“My children are dead.” He said the words so slowly, owned them so wholly, and just stood there over Arthur with a kind of power a weaker, more heavily divided nation than England was not supposed to have. “Perhaps over the years I’ve just said it too much and that’s why I think you’ve forgotten what it means, so let me remind you: my daughter is dead. My son is dead. I gave my children to you in the trust that you and your safest school in the world would protect and nurture them, Arthur of England, and tonight my son’s soul came to me screaming murder!”

No-

“Italy I searched- I searched the whole school, I swear it: I did!”

“Where would you have to search to find the student who set his underclassman on fire last year?” Italy’s question bit deep and clung hard to him, fangs ripping through flesh to find the bones inside. “And how many questions can you ask about children who shaved a young girl’s head in her sleep to punish her choice in friends?” Arthur could feel where this was going and it reminded him of where he was: and why he couldn’t be here. He doubted he’d ever felt truly afraid of anything over three years at Hogwarts, startled and shocked and horrified maybe, disgusted and disappointed and frightened like any sentient being would be in the face of unmitigated danger, but not afraid. Not scared so deeply that his words felt cemented in his chest and every breath was a shaking, shallow effort. Not paralyzed with fingertips trembling as his wand was too far to take up from the sleeve at his hip, the dark and cold of the forest driving him further against the gnarled tree and its twisted, arcing roots.

“You can’t make that decision in these woods, Vargas: you can’t say it.”
“Watch me—”

“Italy, they’ll kill you!”

And that just drove the silence deeper, poisoning the air even further as a cold, chilling light began to wake up somewhere over the leaf-litter. Arthur recognized the long body of Italy’s wand floating over into his grasp. His eyes, always so bright and cheerful, were glowing in such a wrong and unkind way over his black lips and fringed by his wide brow. For a twisted moment, Arthur could believe that Feliciano actually had removed the charm, because his face was exactly the shape and definition of his older, proper self. Why the blue-?

But so angry.

“Who?” Who would dare was what he meant, who would dare kill him for passing judgement on Hogwarts and swearing, England’s voice be damned, to destroy it?

“I don’t know why they’re holding back, but Vargas as soon as you name the place you want taken apart in vengeance they’ll hunt us both down.” Arthur couldn’t forgive his voice for being so shy and desperately quiet. Every breath he forced out of his starving lungs felt cut in half and barely rattled up his throat. “We have to get out of these woods, we have to get back onto the school’s grounds or they’ll kill us.”

“Who did you bring here?”

“No one- they live in the woods.” Arthur flinched back at the way his words changed Italy’s face, his head dropping forward, jaws open but words strangled in his throat by anger. He didn’t say anything, but his eyes were shining. “I know what I said! Italy this isn’t the place- please, just take my hand and we’ll apparate back to the castle—” He reached out as he said the words, his hand barely visible as just a shapeless black extension cutting against the frigid glare of Italy’s hanging wand. “I set off the charm getting out here and I think I passed Longbottom- they know I’m out here and they’re going to come looking. Feliciano, we—”

“Don’t use that name on me.” He felt his arm stop rising and just hang there reaching, fingertips numb in the cold as his hand curled slowly and he felt his face twisting with horror as Italy took a slow step away from him. He was shaking his head, wand hanging from the sleeve he’d attached to the messenger bag he was still wearing at his hip, “Not right now, not after everything you’ve done—”

“I haven’t done anything!”

“That’s my point!”

“Italy, we need to- don’t!”

Italy brought both hands up just before Arthur screamed at him not to, his fingers reaching under the neck of his sweater and shirt until the links of the silver chain hidden underneath were pulled out. The cross appeared with a violent yank and the metal pieces like snake scales were tangled around his fingers. The furious and defiant look on his disguised face vanished when he ducked his head to—Arthur’s whole body went into the motion to draw his wand from the sleeve at his belt and straighten his arm with a bellow. He barely heard the spell he let off, but he saw the liquid yellow light that streamed out the end of the oak rod, and it was something beyond physical when his spell struck the nation in front of him whose defenses were barely half-raised.

And the noise.
The magic struck Italy straight in the chest but it wasn’t meant for him specifically, it bound and constricted and then Arthur felt himself instinctively pushing it forward to escape the backlash of a disrupted casting. Vargas was awash with gold light from neck to waist, mouth wide open in a strangled scream that no child or human could ever produce.

Nations were not humans. They embodied humanity, they possessed human charms, they carried on from the human perspective and molded and mannered themselves after their charges, but nations were not human. The sound that erupted from Italy’s throat when Arthur watched several fat beads of molten silver drip off his scalded hands to the forest floor did not belong to a man or a boy, it was a chorus of voices, a wave of screams, and it blazed down across the stricken earth until both the magic and the noise cancelled each other out.

The light vanished, the sound was buried in silence, and Arthur was left swimming in the absolute black of sensation as a numbness encased his arm and he nearly dropped his wand before the whole limb fell heavy against his side.

There was the smell of burning flesh, and then the heaving, desperate gasps of someone in a great deal more pain than Arthur had had any right to cause.

The mistake was like looking down the barrel of a smoking gun, one burning hole already blasted through one of them, the next round locking into place between Arthur’s blind eyes.

“I’m sorry-”

“Take it off.” Oh God, what had he done? The cross, he’d- “Take it off…!”

He’d transfigured it, he’d shrunk it: not the crucifix itself but the chain- he’d changed the length of the chain and without a clasp he knew, he didn’t have to see it he just knew: he’d made it too short and too small for Italy to take off. It wouldn’t fit over his head, not even the child’s head bowed and shaking in front of Arthur in the wand lightshowed Italy there on his knees, hands clasped under his arms where there was a furious red glow wrapped around his burnt fingers.

“As soon as we get to the castle-” His tongue didn’t want to work, his lips were trembling like he was shivering and frozen from the cold, knees aching as the lumps of tree bark behind him dug into his back and he fought to stand.

“Get it off, England!” It wasn’t Italy’s voice, the low, strangled sound barely even seemed human where his head was down and almost touching the black ground. “Get it off of me! GET IT OFF!”

“Italy, calm down!”

Whatever possessed him to say it was the same thing that pulled the trigger on that metaphorical gun, only instead of a bullet Arthur had to turn and twist to avoid the elbow that came screaming at his head. The cold touch of rain against his cheek was noticed and forgotten in the same breath.

Italy was fast: from a writhing crouch to a sprinter’s start he lunged off the ground with his wand drawn. Arthur only saw him move because his own wand was lit and there was a terrifying red after-image behind Italy’s actions, a fierce crimson glyph rippling across the bark before failing to take against the tree he hit instead, and with the brief advantage behind him Arthur didn’t think before raising his wand again.

An arc of blue electricity off his wand was caught by the end of Italy’s when he spun on his toe to redirect it, Arthur kicking his feet back and jumping clear of the tree’s roots before he flung together a shield charm to take the lightning and sent back a full-body hex to pin the other nation’s limbs to
his sides and stop him.

This was not a traditional wizard’s duel, because when Italy charged and then slid under the banded green body of the hex Arthur was there with five white stars of burning energy to rain down on him and stop his advance. He was countered at once and roared in pain when a violent yellow mist erupted from the ground next to him like mustard gas and ate away his sleeve before burning and bleeding across his skin. It was agony, but not crippling.

Falling to a crouch and swinging his leg out swept Italy’s running feet out from under him, but his hands found the forest floor before Arthur could lunge at him with another curse and he almost took a heel to his chin when Italy shot his foot up.

Arthur was rising again when the blaring scream of a sonic field off Italy’s wands struck him full in the side of the head. It burst one of his ear-drums with a gout of blood out his already damaged ear. Italy’s fist screaming at him instinctively called Arthur’s fore-arm up to knock the strike down and then it was adult training with juvenile bodies. His other fist closed around his wand to punch at Italy’s eye, a feint which dropped down and attacked the wrist that tried jabbing him in the gut. Arthur’s elbow whipped out and drove straight to connect under the other nation’s throat. Italy gagged and lost his breath before Arthur slapped his ear and drove his palm straight into Italy’s nose, snapping it with a wet crunch.

“You’re not a fighter and you never bloody were!” A knee to the gut just to get him the hell down and another hard, angry punch behind the ear to drop him the rest of the way to the forest floor, both of them bleeding and furious as he watched Italy writhe there in the mud for a few seconds, outrage at being attacked replacing horror over his own actions to bring them to this. Two grown men and mature nations wrestling like boys in the dirt and filth of the forest floor, monsters surrounding them waiting for a chance to strike! “Get up!”

“Son of a bitch…” He could swear all he liked just so long as he got up off his belly.

“We’re going back to Hogwarts and that’s the end of it, you!” He-!

It was the far away sound of a long-forgotten threat, a quiet twang like the sigh of braided twine and the reflexive, natural snap of supple timber. If Arthur hadn’t spoken then he would have heard it sooner, instead he had to settle for feeling it, with making sense of it half an instant too late when his voice was cut from his throat and the air of his next breath flooded with the blood of his whole identity welling out of the wound.

And he just stood there with it in him, not understanding it quite the way he should have when he heard the snap this time. The incoming whistle of the stabilizing bristles combed the air before heat spilled down from the small of his back, looking for bones to pry apart and the tender connections inside to black out and die. Except they didn’t, because he didn’t, because Arthur Kirkland was really the nation of England, and England could not be killed by two arrows striking him from an unseen and forgotten hoard.

Even if one of those arrows buried its stone head deep into the sensitive, critical muscles along the lower bend of his spine.

Even if the other was lodged straight through his throat, windpipe thoroughly severed and clogged with liquid life he couldn’t cough or swallow to get free of, the rest of his body utterly paralyzed by the shock of instant trauma that not even his counterpart laying there wronged and abused on the ground had noticed yet, because what was a little bit of blood on top of so much more blood?

“This isn’t the end of things. You’re going to regret what you’ve…” He stumbled when the third
arrow ripped into his shoulder and it felt like, yes definitely, the sharp stone head slipped its deadly way right into the joint and mangled it. “…Engla-? Arthur!!”

But Arthur Kirkland didn’t fall, no. Despite every law of hunting and archery, he didn’t crumble to the ground and die with one fatal wound and two crippling ones all bleeding the life out of him.

It probably looked like he did though, because without the ability to bend down properly, he had to kneel down very hard and reach with one hand, not both, to grab the bastard Italian by the hair and silence his squalling cries with fast, desperate, aimless magic-

‘Anywhere but here.’

Which, if he’d thought about it for even a second longer, went against every single law of Apparition.

Destination, Determination, and Dedication: these were the Three D's of Apparition, the magical ability to teleport at will.

Destination: to clearly imagine and desire the end-point of the enchanted leap.

Determination: the clear and unquestionable desire to reach the destination.

Dedication: the fluid and confident execution of will, the act of arriving not with haste, but exactly when one means to, by performing the act as required and expected.

Arthur Kirkland lacked all three when he made that fateful jump with Italy.

He lost three fingers on his right hand for the sake of having no destination, for holding in his mind only the frantic need to be anywhere but here. Well, he’d succeeded. He wasn't where he'd started and with a howl of frantic pain he understood that his fingers weren't there either.

His determination had been what kept him and Italy together because he was determined not to be separated from the other nation, not to leave him behind or let him fly away someplace else.

But there had been no dedication, only haste, only the frantic need to run away brought on by pain and fear and the reality of being outnumbered and outmatched. Arthur had been going somewhere but he'd been late on the departure and hassled into catching up.

He was blind when they landed, blind and in striking pain through every part of his body. He felt his knees hit the ground and knew he hadn't jumped into a building or water, but there was no other sensation beyond the roaring fire in his spine from a point in his back that went straight up and down to cripple him. If either of his hands tried to fly forward and catch him as he fell, they failed because the arrow that had ripped into his shoulder was now missing and the entire limb was weak and numb from blood-loss, not to mention already burned by that geyser of acid from their fight.

He couldn't breathe, meaning he couldn't smell or taste. There was only the raw copper of blood and meat overwhelming his mouth and nose. He could not breathe: he was drowning fifty miles from the nearest shore and his face was pressed hard to the uneven, bristled ground of a forest floor. He felt the blood oozing out of him from the shaft of wood through his throat, his mangled left hand twitching next to him on the ground as his eyes could stare only at the earth in the night and see nothing, know nothing, only pain.
Only pain, and injury, and the slow, agonizing reality that these wounds would not kill him. He wouldn't be able to walk until the stone head in his spine was removed, and if he left the arrow in his neck where it was he might possibly drown in the blood and surrender breath and life for a few hours, but he was already trying—already suffering to force good arm and crippled hand to move. The one in his neck had to come out first, the one shot meant to kill him suddenly was his greatest threat.

He couldn't even call on that bastard Italian to help him either, because when his lips moved he felt only more hot, thick blood gurgle and surge over his lips like vomit.

It was the only true warmth he could feel too. There was a damp cold hanging in the air where it touched his skin, his vision too overwhelmed by the night and pain to see anything. His forehead was still down as his arm twitched and writhed helplessly, fingers clawing at the carpet of dried needles looking for his own neck.

He couldn't breathe. Between the arrow and the blood there was no room for the air to squeeze through, his entire torso paralyzed by that fact and whatever frantic recovery measures his body could take were being put on hold. He needed air, he had to breathe...

His heart was urging him on with an angry, thundering rhythm. He was blind, without scent or smell, sensation overwhelmed by agony and hearing undone by internal trauma. The only sense Arthur had left was mystical, and that was useless until he could-

His trembling, dirty fingers found something hard and purposefully constructed: a smoothly worked length of wood that, when touched, sent fresh, screaming pain through his shredded throat. Feeling as much of it as he could, the end had been splinched off and was nothing but a blasted end of frayed wood fibres. He had to just hope it had been the head and that the fletching on the back end was small, because he grasped it and...!

He wanted to die. Arthur wanted to just give up and wake up in a hospital bed however many days from now, or open his weeping eyes to sunlight in his London home and Scotland standing over him with a scolding and a plate full of toast and sausage to eat and feel better from. He had, to his own muted horror, done this before: he'd pulled arrows the wrong way from his flesh, he's dug bullets out of his limbs and gut using only a pocket knife or sticks or his own grizzly fingers. He'd never let a surgeon hack off a limb if he'd been conscious to stop it no matter what the damage, but carving foreign objects out of his own abused, lifeless flesh was something Arthur had done too many times before, and that only made doing it again even more horrific.

It wasn't even about the pain, although that brought a white static to his vision and a choking, gurgling roar of pain out of his starved lungs as the fletching- sharp, brittle things that flayed his skin-carved the wound a little wider so the air came out the holes, not his mouth...

Relief... Right on the heels of so much nauseating trauma and there it came: like the rain he could suddenly feel around him as soon as his lungs vomited blood and then gasped cold forest air. He was a nation, not a human, not something meant to be brought down by flint shards and tree branches. Cold air in his chest sparked a warmth that surged up his insides and followed the tortured bend of his spine, guiding his hand back around as he flailed the same arm back, grasped the thumb and forefinger remaining on his maimed hand around the second shaft, and wrenched it free.

A human would have been paralyzed for such a careless act. A nation's spine was no less complicated, but so much more durable as the sensation flashed out of his legs and he doubled over again on the ground, body laying there like a corpse when he fell to his side and waited, just waited, eyes closed, for everything to calm down. Just a few minutes to breathe and to rest and let his flesh heal.
The central nervous system was always quick to repair itself, because Arthur’s heart had barely calmed down before he felt the change. The pain that jolted down his hips and burned through his knees to reach his ankles was no small burden. It shocked him so that with an involuntary groan his whole body shook and went ram-rod straight there on the ground, eyes pinned shut as a few drops of cold rain kissed his cheek.

The wound itself would take time to heal, but as long as nothing hit him in the back he would, ideally, be able to walk just fine... in a few hours, at least...

His chest heaved, gut clenched, and with a sudden breath Arthur vomited again. It was a proper wretch this time with acid and bile searing his already abused throat and leaving behind a mucus film that, by some unexplained means that Arthur had felt before and knew to never question, combined with the blood and clotted heavily over the holes in his punctured wind-pipe. His tongue was thick and swollen, a clumsy, numb slab of meat in his mouth that tried to shove blood and phlegm out past his lips, but at least it worked. He could cough, and through the agony of his ripped throat, he found another breath of cold air.

He could breathe... and after a bit of a rest, maybe, he would be able to walk... Explaining lost fingers to the school was a hurdle he could climb after letting sleep take him for a little while... figuring out where on earth they'd even apparated to would also...

...Arthur opened his eyes again, and he timed it well because his ears simultaneously unplugged to the low, vibrant hiss of spring rain peppering the ground and the forest branches high over their heads.

Their heads, because there were two of them: England and Italy, Arthur and Feliciano, as they had been for three years now.

But they'd... they'd fought tonight. They'd fought and- and more than anything, Feliciano had struck first: he never struck first. Against Austria perhaps once or twice, but in the First World War he had been so out-raged by Austria's politics that he'd changed sides to fight with the Allies right at the outbreak. And then in the Second, he'd been days behind Germany just getting his troops mustered to attack and invade France...

Italy did not hit first, and he never launched the first strike...

But had he really? Arthur’s eyes were closed again when he remembered and he opened them. Had Italy really hit first, or had he hit back?

Oh, he’d terrified Arthur when he’d moved to take off the charm. If he’d done that then there would have been no going back: the centaurs were baffled by their appearance and the claim Hogwarts had over them as students, that was the only way Arthur could understand their hesitance to kill them both off at once. Maybe the ghost lights had held them back too, or their own tension and ultimate battle. But if Italy had revealed himself properly then there would have been more than just three arrows for Arthur to splinch and pull out of his own body.

So it was justified and yet it wasn’t, the way Arthur had attacked not Italy himself: but the charm.

He closed his eyes and remembered the way his voice had changed, the feral, animalistic scream to take it off, to undo what he’d done. Arthur slowly pulled his wounded arm and mangled hand around himself, rolling onto his side and tightening his body up as far as the weeping gouge in his back would let him. They’d fought, and it was their own fault together…

And now Arthur could barely see him in the spitting rain where Italy was laying there silent in the
dark. He was just a black lump which hardly stood out against the midnight black and the trees silent
and ominous over their heads. How far away from the school were they-?

No.

Italy.

Why wasn't Italy moving? That was more important than Hogwarts right now, more important than
lies or fabricated stories. McGonagall could be called upon for any number of things, but not before
Arthur got the real story out of Italy, and for that, he needed Italy to sit up and say something. But he
wasn't-

He wasn't saying anything, he wasn't even curled- not even curled up on his side like he was
brooding or angry? But that was always how he positioned himself when something upset him,
Arthur knew this, Arthur knew him. They'd slept in beds side-by-side for three years now!

But Italy hadn't moved, and if he'd said anything during Arthur’s struggle then he hadn't heard a
sound.

The rain was coming down steadily now, cold fingers brushing down Arthur’s side and back,
stinging his mangled ear and slipping a chill into his wounds and down the rips and cuts in his shirt.
There was a moment where he considered taking off the charm around his wrist, though how he’d
manage it with only a thumb and forefinger for the buckle was beyond him in the midnight black.
But what good would it do? There was no guarantee he’d heal any faster, and being strangled by his
own clothes failing to grow with him was intolerable. He was already cold and bleeding and wet, the
rain splashing down into his hair and reaching across his scalp like ghostly fingers.

Why wasn’t Italy moving? He hadn’t been shot. A broken nose was nothing- even a tiny creature
like Sealand or a proper nation with a squirming personality like Moldova would be up and just fine
after a smack to the face.

“It-” The noise Arthur made trying to call his name was just a puff of air over his tongue before the
flex and tension of his wounded throat stopped him completely. He felt the tickle somewhere in his
clogged lungs to cough, but resisted for fear of reopening the ragged holes and bleeding out all over
again.

He had to move instead. One shoulder was still a ball of electric pain from the wound the arrowhead
had left in him, the same one blistered and sore from that gout of yellow gas Italy had summoned and
struck him with. But the bones were fine; the deep tissues along his upper and forearms was
uninjured regardless of flayed skin, and he had another arm to work with anyways. He could brace
his palms on the ground, and then in agony: push.

Arthur’s hips resisted and the rain didn’t make it any easier. His jeans held tight and heavy over him
and made moving that much harder. He was barely able to make it up to his knees, weight shared
between legs and hands as he tried to stabilize. The rain was just white-noise now, the consuming
static hiss of raindrops showering down from above, puddles forming and bringing mud to mix with
the blood Arthur could still taste and smell around him.

Lifting one hand- the splinched one, up, he could already feel the anxious burn of his body reacting
to the desperate wound. He could barely see the square flat of his palm or the void where three of his
fingers were missing, but he could still feel the bleeding just with the way the cold water mixed with
warm blood down the back of his hand. Curling his index finger and thumb in made the pain even
worse, but he clenched his ‘fist’ and then…
Light

Light not so big or bright as to form a beacon in the night, but it still hurt his eyes and forced him to put it out again with a gasp and flinch of pain. His mind was stressed and fogged with pain, but still capable. It was this body that was struggling to keep up. One more time:

*Lumos…*

Wandless magic was taxing, even something small like this: there was a reason why Wizards the world over had developed wands or rods or staves to help channel and enhance their natural powers. Arthur’s vision blurred and his eyes began tearing up again with the burn of looking into the little orb of pale white light he pulled out of himself. It was so bright in the darkness that at first all he could make out was blackness and white, but slowly, dizzyingly...

It was disturbing to see his own mangled limb in front of him as he released the orb and let it hang in the air. What remained of his hand was completely washed in red blood and black filth, the clean cut of the splinching giving his mind context for the itching burn where the bones had been severed *straight* and the marrow-

He closed his eyes because he couldn’t stand it. Yes immortal, yes long of life, yes a veteran of too many wars, but he was still just human enough that no, he couldn’t look straight at it….

But he could use the same mangled hand to urge the light up higher, like a soap bubble or dandelion seed caught on a gentle breeze. The rain curtained around it as it drifted from him and crossed the distance beside him over towards Italy, and Arthur struggled to move and follow it.

At first it was just the muddy, soiled stripes of Italy’s green and white trainers, a frivolous purchase from home over the holidays. The muddy, blood-splattered blue of his jeans, and the filthy black stains across his green sweater all formed slowly under the stark light.

There were grooves cut into the ground by his hand, marks filling with cold water that made Arthur force his body further, crying out with the staggering pain of his wounded spine. He had to know why Italy had done that: why were his fingers still curled like brittle claws, tips extending and twisting again as Arthur’s better hand looked for purchase on the muddy ground and dragged himself closer.

And when he saw it- *ha…*

Eheha… Oh Lord, it was... it was quite terrible. So terrible in fact that there was no need to fret or panic, because it was much too late for anything like that. Panic was what had brought this on them, so now there was only calm left in its wake.

Calm, but eerie and deranged, like the bead of cold rain water that loosed itself from Arthur’s hair and spread slowly, deliberately, down the middle of his forehead between his brows. Cold water and warm skin swirled together as the rain spread down his nose and, by virtue of the angle down which he was looking, slipped down under his nose to reach his lips. And that was where he lost his awareness of the water, because before him there was only blood.

He’d splinched him, it was that simple. Arthur had splinched himself as well; missing fingers and broken arrows, but that was very different from what had happened here.

His skull was swiftly filling up with noise: laughing, weeping, shrieking sounds and heartless giggles, cheerful cries of remorse and humiliation, coupled with absolute grief and bone-deep abhorrence. It was all noise really, too much to hear and nothing really worth saying…
Italy’s right arm: from the shoulder it was gone. Not there. Somewhere else but certainly not here with the two of them in the rain. It was the first thing Arthur truly understood, because the missing half of his abdomen was filled with darkness and blood: it wasn’t until the light moved and Arthur’s dazed eyes saw the pink bristles of severed ribs and the red glisten of exposed, mangled raw meat that he understood it. The stains across Italy’s clothes weren’t mud, and the weak curl and gasp of his left hand wasn’t done in anger.

Or maybe not anger, but it didn’t matter. Arthur’s knees sloughed over the mud, finding small stones he could barely feel with his body still screaming rest so it could mend. His whole hand caught and grasped the earth to pull himself closer, the right one held out for balance in the heavy rain. The light faded and was barely holding itself together by the time he saw a head that was whole and bloodless lips mouthing silently for air. Italy was looking to the right so Arthur couldn’t see his eyes, but that was okay.

He pressed his butchered right stub of a hand over Italy’s left shoulder, feeling the ice-cold sting of the water soaking them both and chilling Arthur’s open wounds, but it was something to try and make his presence known. Italy’s head twitched and the light showed him the way his throat tensed like he wanted to look around, but Arthur’s other hand stopped him, burnt fingers brushing back his hair before sliding and scraping down between the other nation’s head and the rough, filthy ground. The force to move Italy’s head hurt them both, there was a traumatic spasm and a weak kick from the nation on the ground as Arthur’s skin set itself on fire trying to make him stop, but he was determined.

Something… something slid free and rolled into the mud, a muted cry deep in Italy’s throat paired with the sudden, desperate reach of his left arm bending so his hand could find Arthur’s arm and hold on with weak, shaking fingers. Arthur wrestled him high enough that Italy’s head was braced on his collarbone, one numb knee bent behind the other nation’s back to support him and his own head bowed down to try blocking some of the rain from pouring straight onto Italy’s face.

The smell to strike him again. Not his own blood this time, the red fluid still weeping from his hand and choking his thick throat, but the life essence seeping freely from the severed arm and mixing with the mud under both of them. The sound of it dripping from his broken body was, thankfully, covered by the hiss of the rain that was only speeding the process up, not to mention interfering with his ability to clot…

Apparition was… in a metaphysical sense it was a very tiny worm-hole. A barely-there tube deliberately formed from one place to another, like a thread temporarily tethering two folds of cloth together, but it was also a thread without a needle.

Without destination, determination, and dedication, that thread could fray and that was splinching. It was strands of the physical body peeling off and flying to places unknown. Careless teleportation was like careless driving: the unwary driver nodding off at the wheel and drifting into oncoming traffic, only to be blasted into a million pieces of tempered glass and steaming metal after the collision.

The unwary side-along apparitioner having pieces of their body physically peeled off without warning… An arm could be saved, perhaps even found and reattached via magic, but this…

It was like a semi-circle had clamped over his body and taken away everything that fell inside it. His arm almost to the shoulder, the right side of his rib-cage, gut, and if Arthur could convince himself to properly look: at least a chunk of his hip including the foundation bone, exposing the socket for the hip joint itself. All of it was washed with red, what other colour could anyone expect with living bone and mangled flesh exposed in the night and rain?
“Sleep.” He didn’t need his voice to hiss air over his tongue and past his lips. He could barely breathe enough to manage the pain wracking his lungs now on top of every other agony. His eyes slid shut against the sight of all this horror, forehead falling to nudge against the face below his and still gasping softly in his arms. He kept his burnt arm under Italy’s shoulders, elbow reaching until it was hooked under the crook of Italy’s shoulder just between the trauma of his severed arm and the damage of his shredded torso.

Magic could heal many things… but not this. Italy was only breathing because he was a nation, a nation fighting not to die…

“I won’t leave you.” God no, he wouldn’t dare leave. Arthur would heal hours before Italy did, he’d heal days before Italy’s could- could reasonably breathe again… “Sleep…”

Sleep, but not really sleep. Death couldn’t capture nations harmed in accidents or moments of passion. The Italian Republic would not collapse because Feliciano Vargas had been struck down, because he would not stay down and he would not die: not really. His heart would stop beating, and the synapses of his brain would stop firing as his blood go cold and cells of his body stop consuming and producing… but they would not die.

Nations were not human. They were earth and blood but only in measures. A human being’s soul was a singular entity, a whole unto itself which separated and combined itself with others at will while still remaining self-aware and affluent. A nation’s soul was so much more…

“You can’t heal… sleep… just sleep…”

They were not one identity but millions. They had not one heart-beat but hundreds: the thrum of the parade march, the cheer of the sporting crowd, the rhythm of national song and the percussion of business and industry. Central nerves laid down in London and Rome had dozens of other venues: public houses and transit networks, infrastructure through mountains and languages bridging rivers. Arthur Kirkland and Feliciano Vargas were only one more manifestation in an exhaustive list of possibilities.

So when Feliciano’s grip finally went lax on Arthur’s sleeve, and the weak, shuddering pull of cold air into half a flooded lung slowly stopped… When Feliciano’s entirely, barely-warm body sank down as a thick and heavy weight across Arthur’s bloodied chest and legs… he didn’t really die.

That wasn’t really what happened.

Not truly.

Because although his heart stopped beating and his sightless eyes in the pale light didn’t move when Arthur’s bloody fingertips brushed them closed… and his lips were blue from blood-loss and the cold, enchanted silver glittered close and malevolent where it was tight against his bruised yellow throat… He wasn’t… completely dead.

He was only gone just far enough… to mean that their time at Hogwarts was almost certainly over.

Vargas had vanished without a trace before dinner, and no one except Kirkland could have had any idea where he’d gone. There was no house ghost to bring the news any sooner, and it was only due to Bellatrix knowing little crevasses and tunnels in the castle walls to bypass Kirkland’s hex on the corridor that brought her to the infirmary making a screaming sound Draco had only in his life heard once before from her, and it terrified him.
Where a thirteen-year-old boy had learned a charm so complex was worth asking later, because with Slytherins of all years yelling and chattering at him like mad in the dungeons he was given the added aggravation of hearing the school’s trespass charm ringing in his ears. With a terse word or two not to consider the matter any further, he ushered the rest of his students back into the dorm with a promise to go find the wayward third year.

Common sense dictated an immediate path to the library or even better: up into the Owlery where Kirkland and Vargas were most likely to be found. School protocol instead sent him up to the front doors of the school, and a quick count of the carriages arriving in the rain and the sweeping crowds of students stomping with wet-shoes up the steps to get inside was disorienting to the senses but carried nothing of worry or panic.

“Malfoy!” At least those were his feelings on the matter until the chattering circle of Slytherin sixth-years around him swiftly broke apart and vanished through the doors when a voice bellowed in the night. The sun had fallen quickly, the rain was colder than anyone would have liked in May, and a round orange lantern swinging from a long black rod was the second sign of Professor Hagrid after his booming voice.

Stepping into the rain without a heavy robe was miserable, so the furthest Draco stepped from the safety of the castle was the edge of the steps closer to the towering, shaggy groundskeeper… He smelled as strongly of things Draco preferred not to name as ever, his trusty crossbow resting against the crook of his thick arm, but he also lowered his voice uncharacteristically and came directly to the edge of the stairs with his lantern before speaking again. It wasn’t like him to be even half as cautious, or to the watch the students still passing behind him into the halls for dinner. When the half-giant spoke, Draco gave himself a shake because he’d never heard the groundskeeper try to utter a fast and frantic whisper:

“There be Slytherins in the forest, Malfoy, Neville just-”

“What!?”

It was unseemly to raise his voice but it was hardly worth it for him to care! He was off the steps and down in the rain before he heard heavy footsteps next to him and setting a fast pace as the school’s ambient glow fell away at once.

“Glad t’see you takin’ it so seriously-”

“But course I am! It’s been four years since anyone from my house dared to-!”

“Malfoy, it’s more serious than that!” No, nothing was more serious than a repeat of- “Neville saw your Mister Kirkland runnin’ like a bat out of hell and crash straight through the trespass charm. He followed ‘im and-”

“And sent you to fetch me so I can put Mister Kirkland back together and then pull him apart all over again!” Because these were the first and only circumstances under which Draco would even consider allowing Longbottom to hand down severe punishments on Slytherins. He was already drafting the letter to Kirkland’s family in his head!

“Draco,” He kept walking when the half-giant’s footsteps stopped but then was forced to round about on him because of the name he chose to use. Yes, they were both members of Hogwarts’ staff, and yes of course Rubeus Hagrid held seniority, but that didn’t change who they were outside of Hogwarts and it certainly didn’t put them on a first name basis…

And it certainly didn’t give Hagrid the right to give him such a lost, almost pitying look with wide
black eyes hiding under the snowy volume of his thick brows and bead.

“It’s not just Kirkland in the woods…”

“Where is he, Hagrid? You aren’t going to tell me Longbottom can’t catch a sprinting child.” And how could there be more than one? The trespass charm had only chimed once and Hagrid had just *said-*

“Neville sent his patronus back to get me, Draco, and Fang’s waitin’ for you at the edge of the woods if you want him as a guide while I go get Firenze and try to round up the Centaurs to help with the search.” Search. He honestly meant what he was saying, so what he was *not* saying was that-

“*Where is he?*” They-*they:* Kirkland had run from the dorms with Vargas and then returned alone, only to run again. “*Where are they!?*”

No. He was not going to react like this.

Instead he was going to take all of that fear and all of that anxiety and hold it tightly between his thoughts, break the monster of ill feelings and chilling memories into their component pieces, and put them away. Anger over rule-breaking, disbelief over who the culprits were, anxiety born from bad memories, and the memories themselves told sternly and simply to return to the isolated compartment of guilt and shame constructed to hold them.

And once all of that was done, Draco Malfoy was able stand there calmly again, because even the selfish thought that at least his own son was safe down in the dungeon was banished from his conscious mind. There was no time for any frivolity, only action.

“Kirkland vanished and I’m sure when he turns up you and Neville both will want a go at him, but the Patronus brought back this too…” ‘*This*’ was pulled out of the heavy layers of wet wool and pressed felt that made up Hagrid’s coat, and with its cleanly severed strap and thick square body, Draco recognized the school’s crest blazed across the loose flap of the book bag. He took it in both hands when it was offered, and his senses recoiled. Twice.

Once from the black magic that came surging down from a cracked, molded spine of a large book wedged between a copy of third year Magical History and Slughorn’s Antidotes With Additives text. And again, from the volume of congealed black *blood* pooling in the bottom of the bag.

Then he spoke:

“Take this to McGonagall at once and *then* find Professor Firenze. And do step lightly, Hagrid, or it may mean the end of Hogwarts.”

And then they parted.
Rescue

Chapter Notes

More violent description, take care.

Keep him safe.

It took so long before Arthur could understand if he was doing the right thing: staying there in the rain with dead weight resting heavy against his chest and leg. The blood was still oozing from his own wounds while the lifeless body in his arms had almost completely drained, the mud around them thick with an off-red layer of blood and meat, mixing with the skim of rain water drizzling down from the night sky.

Keep him safe.

When a nation's injuries were grievous enough, their minds would shut down and their flesh seize up like in death. There was only so much trauma they could handle before it would begin to affect their greater selves, or perhaps it was merely God giving them an ounce of kindness laced with poison: a chance to heal without sensation, because recovery was never easy...

Arthur could already feel it burning in his hand once the final dredges of heat vanished from Feliciano's mangled body. He pulled his hand around to look at it and saw three grizzly bumps forming over his knuckles instead of the razor straight cut of the splinching. The lumps were the first stretches of bone and flesh already beginning to sting and rip free from the open wound... He didn't touch his own throat, and instead contented himself to wrap his arm around Italy's head, his own face dropping down with eyes closed to rest their foreheads together.

Keep him safe. Because if a nation died in a fire, or was torn to pieces, or crushed and mangled beyond recognition, or beheaded, or flung with weights into the bottomless ocean, then whatever weakened remains were left behind would rot and decompose like any other lump of flesh. The spirit would escape and return to life and flesh in their capital, or some small rural village, in the middle of mid-day lunch hour or in the quiet fall of twilight along a dusty road.

But Italy's state wasn't severe enough to grant him the peaceful, if disorienting, reawakening in a better place with familiar things. He was going to fight and claw and rip his way back to life here in the Scottish Highlands, and if Arthur wanted proof of it then all he had to do was force himself to look down at the gory mess dribbling from the open cavity in front of him.

Splinching was a clean cut, laser-precise and flawlessly thorough. Like Arthur's fingers, Italy's ribs had been sliced at clean angles, and as the burn picked up and began to sear like a brand over his knuckles, he could steel himself to look down at the rounded extensions of severed rib beginning to extend out and regrow.

Italy couldn't feel the pain of it, thank God, but the price for that luxury was steep. Arthur put his head back down. He doused the pale lamp and plunged them both back into darkness and the ambient hiss of rain, his forehead against the cold brow he was holding close. He kept his arm wrapped safe around Italy's head. It blocked the stench of things worse than blood coming from the corpse, and his own breaths bouncing back from cold flesh could fool his skin into thinking there
was warmth to be had in staying close.

"I'm sorry..." Arthur felt strong enough to form the words now, his voice still nearly absent and grinding against the swollen, slowly patching walls of his throat. He knew Feliciano couldn't hear him, but he'd already closed his friend's eyes and as he whispered the apology Arthur moved his face until he could kiss the cold wet skin between his eyes. It was as much a sign of respect as apology, something to make sure his own heart remained at a steady, hard rhythm trying to beat away the cold saturating his back and freezing his limbs. Eventually the rain would have to stop, and at some point too: the sun would have to rise.

It was going to be a long wait and shelter would serve them well, but there was danger and difficulty in trying to move. Eventually they were going to be found, but whether it was by centaurs, teachers, or one of their own was hard to say. Arthur could only hope for the last one while trying to slowly sift through his own mind for answers to the first two.

One thing he was certain of was that another encounter with centaurs would mean a fight. He absolutely could not die in these woods: there was no telling what the beasts would do with the bodies or where they might wake up after it was done... God forbid the two of them were found by Hogwarts as nothing but mangled, stampeded corpses...

But friends were set to arrive in Hogwarts come daylight, and maybe they'd even come sooner if McGonagall sent for Scotland and South Italy ahead of schedule. It wasn't in their nature to go blatantly violating the school's rules so spending the night outside in the shadows of a forbidden forest was hopefully as deeply out of character in the headmistress' mind as it was bound to be for her staff. It was hard for Arthur to let himself admit it, but Scotland was the one person he truly did want to see come crashing through the trees right now...

Not to mention… how much he truly would have preferred to hear crashing under the tireless drone of the rain. Crashing, panting and yelling: not the slow, almost unheard squelch of mud and snapping wet branches. Not the deliberate, strong presence that moved slowly into his conscious sense of the forest because of the way the rain stopped hammering the ground so hard, pattering down a bare back instead and a hide that carried an animalistic smell he shouldn’t have been able to sense, but he could.

He knew when he was being watched, and he knew the harsh, heavy breath of a beast much larger than himself even at his natural height. He also, however, knew his strengths.

The pain was burning higher in his hand. The screaming twist and fire of bones regrowing paralyzed his remaining fingers and ripping down his wrist. He pulled his head up and made the same trembling, bloody palm brush against his friend’s lifeless face, touched his lips to Italy’s forehead again, and then looked up properly with the rain soaking his hair to his skull and running cold rivers down his cheeks.

“Do not strike me.” What a young, horrible voice he still spoke with. What else could he lose by simply taking the charm off? But it was too late for that now, not with the blackness around them giving way just enough for Arthur’s eyes to sense the tall, threatening body towering there at the edge of the nearby trees. “We brought no harm. Attack me again and you will die.”

A loud grunt hissed through the rain and darted between raindrops to reach him, and the heavy stomp of hoofed feet slammed the ground. It was aggressive enough that Arthur reacted in kind, holding Feliciano’s still face a bit closer against him before taking his ruined hand and swinging it out to his side in the rain. The cold had numbed his shoulders and back, and the white-hot pain clamping down over the butchered half of his hand couldn’t get any worse as he spread barely-there
spindles of bone like fingers, channelling his own mystic powers through flesh already oversaturated with his natural healing energies.

Blue light washed over the pouring rain and the bloody ground, hitting Vargas’ twisted legs and the outline of the centaur standing there. A ring of silver light followed by a smaller one to rest inside, a circle of runes forming with swift alignments of thought and will to fill in the space between both bands. The ancient, runic mark of lightning painted itself down the middle and hovered there in the air, fingertips flesh and ghostly holding it poised and ready. The scream of wandless magic wracked down his spine looking for more places to weaken, his legs trembling from the stress of holding so much weight in such an unbalanced way.

“He disturbed the black magic of the dell!” Black magic?

“Go to Hogwarts.” There were more words he wanted to add, but his throat wasn’t strong enough for too much chatter. “Attack, and you will-”

A loud whistle and bang somewhere far away through the rain and trees cut him off, a blast of red light which barely filtered through the night catching his and the centaur’s attention. Arthur’s half-there fist closed and the blue light fell apart, the signal flare of red sparks putting a conflict in him before he made his decision.

It was rash, but it was better. Closing his eyes again Arthur twisted his arm back into position cradling Italy’s head, an image forming in his mind of a place that was just at the edge of his power’s range. No panic this time, only the brief calm of terrible things which couldn’t get any worse. He knew where to go, and what it would be like when they got there.

He knew that he had to, absolutely had to, arrive in that place and nowhere else.

And he decided, fully and willingly, to ignore the loud, keening sound of someone screaming his name through the dark night. Instead, Arthur chose to fall into the tight, constricting, disorienting fall of an apparating leap, and so he and Italy vanished.

One of the rarest assignments any Professor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry could receive was a call to leave the actual school grounds. It left a mix of emotions: was she being sent away because she was trusted, or because she was expendable in the search for two missing students?

But foolish thoughts like that didn’t change the fact that Professor Winona Hadrian, Curator of Muggle Studies and Head of Hufflepuff House, was on her way to London instead of out into the forbidden forest with the rest of her peers. When Rubeus Hagrid had come hurrying into the great hall and whisked away with the Headmistress it had made sense to eat quickly, and when Professor Hadrian herself was summoned to an empty classroom- not even the Headmistress’ office! She was very quick about a short trip to her chamber within the school to change out of her yellow robe and into something a bit more muggle.

It was a well-known and widely accepted fact that muggles were afraid of bright colour, but the calmest shades of grey and brown in Professor Hadrian’s wardrobe weren’t acceptable for going out in London unless capes and robes had come back in style while she hadn’t been looking. A pin-stripe yellow and black suit was going to have to do the job for her, and there was absolutely no time for fussing over anything else as she escaped Hogwarts via Floo Powder with alarming news for the Kirkland family.
And, technically speaking, the Vargases as well, but the Headmistress wasn’t asking her to go all the way to Italy in a night.

Dinner at Hogwarts was served at six o’clock sharp every evening, but it was nearly seven thirty by the time Winona was well on her way through the Floo Network for the soul wracking experience of traversing hundreds of miles via the twisting, winding, rocketing paths between fireplaces. When an uncomfortable pain began to build between her shoulders and along her neck, that was when the Professor acknowledged her limit and jumped out through the next doorway.

It was disorienting and much like jumping off a swing as a child, the loss of balance and the necessary confidence to just land and let her body catch itself, senses swimming in noise and colour.

Looking down at green marble floors and then lifting her dark eyes to a multi-tiered fountain in the centre of the massive chamber she’d just arrived in, the Professor swallowed the queasy burn in her throat at the sight of a large gilded clock-face reading eight o’clock in the evening. One could only hope that by the time she made it back to the school, this would all be settled.

A spry little witch with braided black hair and fuchsia robes was already stepping up to her with a smile, a clip-board with a small gold box clutched to her chest and a name badge glittering from her shoulder. Her presence stopped Professor Hadrian from turning right around and going back through the fires crackling behind her.

“I’m terribly sorry, Ma’am, but Ministry Offices are closed for the evening—” Her words confirmed the meaning of the gold script flowing around the base of the fountain: this was the Ministry of Magic’s main home under the streets of London. Good, that meant she was nearly there and the Professor could lift a hand gently.

“There’s no need for that, I’m on official Hogwarts business and just need a moment to catch my breath.” The phrase ‘Official Hogwarts Business’ caused a little jump and then a full-body quiver of excitement in the other witch, but that was less important than the help that was immediately offered.

“Then I would be happy to prep the channels taking you wherever you need to be- or can you not say?” The gold box was immediately held out and its paper lid opened, revealing empty rows of wrapping paper and a few remaining scattered chocolate pieces. With a gracious smile the Professor took one at once and answered before biting into the enchanted sweet to soothe her stomach and calm the unsteady feelings.

“The Kirkland Residence here in London, if you please.”

“Of course, Professor.”

Safe. Finally safe.

The place where Arthur felt himself come down was cramped and unpleasantly damp. There was no extra light, meaning there was no light at all, and the air was so still and stale that he almost missed the sheets of pouring rain.

He could still hear the rain though, and with his burnt hand digging through the shadows, he found his wand and whispered the word for light so he could see.

The walls and floor and ceiling were all made of wood, old and dead and lined with mould and mossy patches. There was one ripped open hole in the den that led out to a pond and a small dell
between the thin birch trees spreading out around Hogsmeade Village, but they were a hill and a half from the last row of houses and workshops.

Arthur shone the light down further into the hollow tree, desperate to find it empty save for the stagnant water of the pond that had swallowed the top half of the tree when it tipped over and died. No animals- not wolves or bear cubs or anything, and that was enough relief to make him look back around over Italy’s head and point his shaking wand tip at the entrance.

A charm to block light. A spell to stop wind. Another one to shadow the entrance and muffle sound, and one final burst from the wand tip and his weeping, exhausted mind to land in the grass across the pond and let him know if anyone dared come too close.

And then Arthur shocked himself, because he was weeping.

He was going to tear his throat open again, but when he drew a thick, deep breath in it came stumbling back out of him with shreds of his voice and hot tears: the only sense of warmth left in him. His wand fell from his grasp and rolled on the wooden floor until it came to a stop, casting shadows across the walls of the hollow tree and shining across- across…

“No more blood…!” He could barely use his own voice, and speaking with tears made him cough and watch blood ball itself up and drop from his lips. “No more…!” He tried to catch the thick, heavy glob of dead flesh and essence but then just let it fall to his filthy clothes, his legs absolutely drenched in black and the stench of it overwhelming the tiny space.

He tried to look over at Italy but- before he- his hand-! 

“AHHHH!” He was not at his limit, he refused to accept that this could be it: three lost fingers, a pile of guilt an- and…!

No.

No, it was more than that…

Arthur clutched the wrist of his healing hand and doubled over, head coming down until his forehead touched the still, cold brow of the corpse he’d dropped on the log floor in front of him when they landed from the jump. He held his eyes shut and he fought off the hot tears as they clung to his eyelashes and dripped like the rain that had pounded them earlier. He dug his thumb into the heel of his other hand, fingers curled tight around his palm trying to soothe the pain that was only growing worse.

Joints hurt, joints hurt more than anything when they regenerated, and growing back three at once made him scream again because it wasn’t fast and it wasn’t quick. He opened his eyes against his own judgement and looked down in the wand-light, he saw his hand trembling in his own gasp and bit back another wail because there was no relief.

To look at his hand now it was as if the splinching had only taken off the top halves of those three missing fingers: the middle, ring, and small. There was raw pink flesh wrapped around red bone, but now came the screaming pain of having the joints feel like a hot iron vice was being clamped over each knuckle, twisting and crushing and condensing with no relief, there was no relief.

He wasn’t at home, he wasn’t warm, and he wasn’t truly safe. He wasn’t himself with the charm still bound over his wrist where his burnt arm was slowly regaining sensation after the blinding cold of the rain: the ceaseless itching now of restored skin as the burns were crusting up and blistering. This small body had no tolerance for what had been done to it! There was no medication, no familiar
sounds or peaceful distractions! He wasn’t in a hospital or a military camp: Arthur Kirkland was trapped in a mouldy foxes’ den with a dead body and his own agony!

"I'm sorry…!" And all of that was why it was so hard to bring himself under control, and all too soon it came up to the point where he couldn't even keep up the effort to try. Gasping through the pain, he felt the tears come back fresh and fast, pushing himself up a little bit so he could... could try something else: try to fix a little bit of what he'd done instead of fail to hold his stiff upper lip together.

It meant trying to straighten Italy's limbs in the narrow space of the tree trunk. His legs were kicked over each other and Arthur wound up with more blood on his hands from the side of Italy's hip that had been carved away. The flesh was ridged and warped now, a large mound of bone protruding from his body with muscles straining to reattach at the hip and fill in the socket for his right thigh and leg to realign. There was no way with such limited space for Arthur to know if he was making things any better or worse, he just had to take meager comfort in the fact that there was no way for Feliciano to feel any more pain. Not right now, not before enough of his torso came back and his body could physically sustain the demands of living.

But it would still be agony... torment worse than what Arthur was crippled with as he finally just gave up and collapsed with his face down against the damp wood, writhing, burning hand trapped under him and held tight by his other fingers, eyes still shedding tears and involuntary cries gasping from his lungs.

Sleep.

He absolutely needed to sleep.

Sleep and just rest, surrender consciousness and finally give his lesser wounds a chance to heal. His face, his shoulder, his burns: all of that still needed rest. There would be no food from now until they were either found by professors or by their friends sent into the forest by McGonagall to rescue them. But sleep- even through the pain, he could give up and lose his conscious mind for at least a few hours.

He didn't even know how much time had passed anymore. Between entering the forest and now, he'd completely lost all sense of time, and his watch’s face was too covered by filth and blood for him to read it when he tried.

So he just-

Just a few hours...

There wasn’t much room left for him with the need to let Italy lay with his spine perfectly straight and his amputated arm given space to regrow if possible, but Arthur inched higher, closer to the opening where the sound of the rain was hovering with the static promise to follow him in his dreams. It was colder here and if he could have managed it, he would have tried taking up his wand again for a warming charm. The tree, he could only hope, would have held the heat well.

But he couldn't. Just thinking about it was too much. He laid there curled on his side with his body crying from dozens of different pains. Even magic was too hard and his wand was already letting the light at its tip fade out with his exhaustion. To pass out and sleep with his head next to Italy's, both of them drenched with rain and blood, filthy from laying in the mud and grime of the forest and Arthur's mistakes.

He had no right to try and hold Italy's ice cold and bloodless hand, but the stiffness of death was
already beginning to take full effect of Feliciano’s untouched side. His fingers barely bent, so even with darkness creeping back up and Arthur's mind slowing further and further down, he knew by the time he woke up that Italy's entire left side would be rigid and stone-like as a proper corpse. It would take days for him to wake up... Hours for Arthur and hours more for the blinding agony in his bones, but days for Feliciano...

Days they... would never find a way to explain...

But that was simply how it was all going to be.

“Longbottom, Malfyoy, Hagrid, Flitwick, Desford, Parkinson, Creevey, Huntington, McRuth, and now Hadrian- the entire school is out looking for them!”

“They didn’t tell us anything about a stunt like this, McGonagall, sit down.”

“Sit down?” Daniel was not in the mood to be sassed by as worldly and respectable a witch as Minerva McGonagall, but at his words the pacing, outraged Headmistress of Hogwarts rounded on him with such a trill in her voice that he was almost tempted to let his frustration go with her, but he didn’t. “Sit down, Mister Kirkland? Half of my staff are off gallivanting at midnight through a storm looking for your brothers with the fate of this entire school hanging in the balance, and I’m meant to sit down and- and what exactly?”

She spoke so quickly and so sharply, her entire body trembling under a shawl of black fur and emerald robes, hands clasped in front of her as she strutted back and forth behind her desk reprimanding the three nations in her crowded midnight office. The headmasters’ portraits hanging around the office were all awake but completely silent, stern glares of disapproval firing down on them from every angle. Even jolly old Albus Dumbledore was directly behind Daniel’s back where he could sense the sagely image shaking his head slowly.

“Perhaps I should knit a sweater for the poor boys when they get back?” The headmistress hissed, tilting her head with the shade of a grandmotherly smile before the disguise was ripped away with anger and a stainless-steel spine: “If any of them are injured under the pretenses of looking for two immortal agents of the state then rest assured the Ministry will-!”

“Minerva, I can’t give you a reason why because I haven’t got one!” He shouted back, bringing his volume up to stop her from so much as imagining that she had him beat in this discussion. “You say Arthur was seen running into the woods which means nothing snatched him up and made him go there, so him and Vargas went on their own! Call your people back and let us-”

“I can call all day and night, Mister Kirkland, but with the evidence which urged them into the forest in the first place, none of them will give up their search until I can tell them their students are either safe in this office or already dead!” At once a respectable answer and yet at the same time, condemning. What could have pulled those two idiots out of the school at all, nevermind at night when they would obviously be missed?

No, England wasn’t that stupid, he’d pulled off too many tactical missions over the centuries to go making an error this great. He would have timed it better, or launched whatever this was expecting them to be missed… as a fail-safe, maybe?

Professor Hadrian had been the representative from Hogwarts to burst into the townhouse basement in London and then apparate upstairs when the charms on the door blocked her from walking like a
normal person. Fierce but not unkind, she’d verbally taken Scotland by the ear when he’d told her all three adults in the house—himself and the visiting South Italians—would be at the school tomorrow.

He’d tried telling South Italy and Sicily to just stay home, but something had gotten into Romano and there was no point in arguing with him. As soon as they’d finished the nauseating jump from one end of the isle of Great Britain to the other, nothing but a severe look between Headmistress and Professor had sent Hadrian away and, presumably, out into the rain.

“Veneziano is already… critically injured.” It was better than saying ‘dead’, because death for them wasn’t the same at all and using that word would drive the tension even higher. South Italy didn’t step forward where he was already in line with Scotland in front of the Headmistress’ desk, but he still wasn’t fully himself anymore either.

Scotland could sympathize. It had been a long, long time since he’d last been jolted with the awareness of Wales or England or North Ireland surrendering breath and conscious thought. Being part of a whole wasn’t the same as being autonomous and completely independent. The United Kingdom had to know when a member of its union was struck down, be it in a freak accident or from an assassin’s bullet, the nation was required to know when an equal part of its whole self was defeated.

It was like peering out the window of a house to see the weather. Now, the weather couldn’t do much to what was happening inside the house, but it still had an effect. It might rain too hard on the flower pot hanging in the window sill or discourage you from stepping outside to run some errands. The wind might tell you to pick up a jacket, or the sun coax you out for a jaunty walk and a meeting with friends. But foul weather couldn’t stop you from picking up a book or watching a bit of the telly, or ringing up someone in another house and saying ‘would you get a load of that hail!’.

Death was rather like looking outside at noon and seeing nothing but blanket darkness. It didn’t have to be a cold or a wet dark, but you had to do more than just take a glance to see the financial rain or understand if the dark was passive and sad or aggressive and ready to strike at you. It meant the human body had to just sit down and let the nation’s mind look inward and outward at the same time, the exact same thing South Italy had been at since he’d gone very quiet somewhere between appetizer and entree in London.

“Then he should come home!” Whether McGonagall used that word home because of some inherent fondness for two beings who’d lived as students for three years in her care, or simply in a burst of frustration whereby Hogwarts was the sanctuary all in pain should run to, it didn’t much matter. Daniel and Sicily both raised a hand, but because Hogwarts was his and this land was his, Scotland spoke instead.

“If his injuries can’t be explained, Minerva, that might be why they’re still out there.” And then, before any of them could forget and let the point slip away: “Show me what evidence you’re talking about. What’s got a fire lit under your Professors?”

“Do they need more than knowing their students are in danger?” Sicily’s question was fair enough, but the way the Headmistress closed her tired eyes and reached down behind her desk meant the nations were still getting their answer.

“Professor Longbottom was the first one into the woods, and I cannot tell you when all of this began because the only word back from him was the patronus which delivered this.”

They all came forward when a square child’s messenger bag was pulled out of a drawer and placed on the desk. There was muck and filth all over it along with a familiar, metallic stench that made Scotland’s heart fall. Damn it, England.
“That isn’t English blood…” Sicily whispered the words and South Italy didn’t answer her, he just pulled the bag around carefully and let the flap fall open on the top. The contents were blood-splattered and covered in mud, children’s textbooks and ink quills all soaking wet inside.

“Something’s missing.” Was all he said, and Scotland had to hold a hand out towards the bag himself before he felt it. That sense of something else, of something not quite right. Minerva clasped her hands again and took a deep, shuddering breath which made Daniel almost repeat himself for her to sit down and rest.

“A book of black magic was inside when it was delivered to me. I could not stand to have it unbound in this office. It is safe, and will be turned over to you when my staff members are all safely returned to the school.”

“Fair enough. Now, I’m through with listening.” It was Miss Sicily who spoke up again, not even giving Daniel a chance to ponder over McGonagall so easily turning over the evidence. Instead he had to look past South Italy when the smaller Italian region broke away from the discussion with a harsh turn on her heel. “Why Veneziano ever allowed Italian children to enter this school is impossible to me, but if those two are hiding then I will go and give them a reason to stay out of sight!”

“Ah-”

“Chiara-”

They’d been in the office and going to meetings all day before this interruption, so Sicily went marching with heeled shoes and an office blazer over a skirt that was guaranteed to put her in an even worse mood once she was soaking wet and up to her ankles in mud. Both of them tried to get her attention and failed as she crossed the office floor and was already down the first few steps of the stairwell.

But then Chiara of Sicily abruptly froze on those steps, and then suddenly moved in reverse to get back up the stairs as fast as humanly possible, barely glancing over her shoulder to check herself as the hard soles of her polished black shoes scuffed the floor. She turned and ran back to them?

A frightful word passed between the Italians but Daniel had his answer before he could translate, a sharp sting running down his spine that made his shoulders seize up. He took two fast steps to get between the other nations and what had just come up to fill the passageway down into the rest of the school.

“They’re friends!” He lifted his voice and caught the liquid blue stare of the dark-skinned beast whose horned head was already turning towards the foreign nations, and Scotland practically leapt to break the eye-contact before it could form. Arms held up and spread to show no wand or weapon, putting himself right in the middle so there was no questioning his actions. “These are my friends, and they are not, in anyway, intruding by being here.”

He heard the Headmistress’ voice behind him but Scotland was too focused on the centaur, whose heavy breaths seemed to slowly even out. His blue eyes refused to break contact for several hard moments, but he either sensed or saw something in the nation himself and relented. The tension that had flared up slowly began to calm down, and finally McGonagall’s words came back into ear-shot.

“What’s gotten into you? Professor Firenze is a highly respected member of-” England wasn’t this stupid. Arthur Kirkland wasn’t ignorant and foolish enough for something like this. “The herd protecting the forest has guarded students from harm for generations-”
Centaur’s and foreign nations did not mix. A centaur’s loyalty was to the land that bred and raised them up, to the wind and the rivers and the mountains which rang with national tradition and glory. Without special, careful, *explicit* permission, any visiting foreigner was a threat, any non-Scottish presence was a violation, and while foreign humans could be tolerated and dismissed, a foreign *nation* was the catalyst for raw, instinctive attack.

And nations knew this. Maybe not young nations like America or Germany who didn’t have the right kind of contact with their magical communities to know the right kind of things about their enchanted beasts and wilds, but old Europe knew. Great Britain and Scandinavia and the Baltics and Balkans and all the rest. They knew. They intrinsically knew.

“They were never meant to enter the forest.” Scotland turned around and he ignored the centaur and the witch to focus on South Italy’s wide, outraged eyes. His long face was very pale, bowed lips parted like he’d been about to speak but rage had stolen the words away. His head was tilted just enough like he’d lost all sense of it and didn’t know how to process what he was hearing. Scotland didn’t blame him. “I didn’t forget but *someone* must have and I’m telling you: I’m going right now to get in there and put a stop to this.”

“And I’m telling you, Kirkland!” There was no point trying to calm him, when South Italy opened his mouth properly it was with a roar. “Something lured my brother into a death trap filled with monsters! Things that will chase him down and tear him to pieces! And I know he’s injured; I can *feel* it! I know that when I see him again he will be in a slumber so deep that nothing can reach him! *And that’s on you!*”

“Vargas-”

“That’s on you!”

A hand on Italy’s arm made him turn and gave Scotland a break so he could look at the stunned face of the Headmistress and the tightly bound insult coming off the centaur.

“I’ll go to Venice and check along the Lido and Saint Mark’s for him. If he’s not there, then I’ll go to Rome. Lovino, you need to calm down.”

“Headmistress…” The centaur spoke in a low timber that would have been pleasant, just not right now with this entire damned operation collapsing out from under them. “I come with word from my people saying the threat has been removed from the forest. Ronan and the others are attempting to convince your professors to return to the safety of the castle, as there is no guarantee the threat to Hogwarts will not return.”

“Firenze, I don’t understand…”

“It can be explained later.” McGonagall was finally sitting behind her desk instead of trying to stand through all of this, but Scotland just looked back up at the centaur and was brief. “She calls you Firenze, is that your name?” A damned irony then too if someone had given him the same name as an Italian city.

“Indeed. And you are the mountains and the rivers and the cold wind.”

“I am.” But before there could be any illusions, Daniel Kirkland wasn’t one for having people take him the wrong way. “And when the dawn breaks, Firenze, I will meet with your elders and the rest of your herd because I neglected to give them a proper warning about what would happen if anyone dared touch a hair on my brother’s head.”
“Your brother!” South Italy piped up again and Daniel held up a fist to shut him up.

“You’ve embarrassed me, Firenze!” He watched the centaur blink and heard the grate of hooves over warm castle stones. Good! “Your people have treated my allies like enemies and I played my part, now play yours and redeem yourself!”

“They have already left the forest—”

“Which way did they go?” The forest was vast, it was miles in some directions but less than a mountain slope in others. A centaur’s sense was stronger than a nation’s when it came to tracking down interlopers who meant no real harm! “Your honour rests on this!”

The beast blinked twice and instead of retreating again, he raised a back hoof and cracked it on the stones, his front legs shuffling to bring himself back into balance at the top of the steps.

“Towards the village…”

“Then that’s where we’re going. Vargas—”

“You’re not leaving me behind.” That was exactly what he wanted to hear, and that was why with a promise to explain things properly to the headmistress upon their return, Sicily departed to go off in search of North Italy at home, while South Italy and Scotland sped through the castle corridors and out into the night and the rain.

The alarm spell outside the log woke Arthur up twice.

The first time it was a voice he didn’t know— a chorus of voices really, and though he dared not creep closer to the broken mouth of the hollow tree he could still hear them calling through the hiss of the rain. Without the spell to block light over the jagged opening, he might even have seen lanterns spilling light and bobbing between the trees and the rain.

He had just enough time to feel wretched for pulling wizards and witches of Hogsmeade out into the rain. Professor Desford’s voice fluted through the night to call his name, but he just laid his exhausted head back down to rest. His knuckles were still burning, the same nodules of bone stalled where they’d been when he’d fallen asleep: prepping joints and growing different tissues; cartilage and bone and vein with tangled tendon and flesh…

“Kirkland!” there would be no explaining a dead body to Desford, whose voice sounded so high above that maybe she was flying on one of her brooms to cover ground faster. “Vargas!?” But he had to admire her efforts in trying to find them, because it broke his heart a little more to hear her calling before he fled from the pain again and fell back into a deep, unnatural sleep.

The next time…

“Veneziano!”

The next time Arthur got up right quick.

“Arthur! You two-faced hogspit! Where are you!?”

His hands grappled with molded wood and scraped against wet hair and cloth to find his wand, dragging it out from between two cold bodies and struggled to rip and tear his own enchantments
The only thing which stopped him from launching a full skyline of red sparks through the same opening was a very chilling, very terrible sound.

"Veneziano!"

Not that sound.

“…ug!”

That one.

“No-” No, he couldn’t be hearing that sound, not that sound: the sick gurgle of a throat clogged with blood reflexively trying to move and clear itself with no air in or out to help it. “No, don’t-!”

Arthur dropped his wand and scrambled around until he almost hit his head on the low ceiling of the shelter, hands groping at ice cold shoulders that trembled once with a collapsing shudder, and when his blind hands touched Italy’s lifeless face in the dark there was a curl to his lips- the horrifying sound of a limb moving and scraping against the filth around them.

He was being called out to by his other half in a foreign place far from home. His soul was still resting dormant inside a shell it had been fighting to repair for hours- but it wasn’t ready! He couldn’t breathe yet! Just a touch down his side almost cut Arthur’s fingers on raw bone and cold pus and fluid from shredded insides. There wasn’t enough of him rebuilt yet, if his soul tried anything it was just going to-

“Sleep- sleep! Don’t do this- don’t do it, Vargas, God no, don’t!” Don’t fight yet, don’t reach yet, don’t try to come back yet! He needed days of rest, not a single terrible night! “No, please don’t- don’t- just don’t- Scotland! Daniel!”

He grabbed Italy because he didn’t know what else to do. Arthur pulled his shoulders up against his own chest and wrapped both arms tight around him, holding where he could without touching the wounds again directly and twisting his head around to scream at the opening into the night:

“Dan!” Just scream and not care anymore if anyone else heard him because there was no explaining any of it, not anymore, and if the rescue he’d been waiting for ran off and left him alone in the rain with his friend to die again then- “DANIEL!!”

And there was warmth, the first warmth Arthur had felt in hours, but it was still too cold to feel like real blood, thick and congealed as it dribbled down his legs from the body half in his lap, the body trembling so hard because things were trying to move and work again but couldn’t. His heart was trying to beat without blood, his brain firing back to life without air, organs all a mess or simply missing and half his limbs barely attached or cut off all together.

And there was no helping him, no talking him through it with his ears plugged with filth and blood and those parts of his brain barely functioning. Arthur wasn’t warm enough to soothe him and there was an instinctive panic for life that meant there was no gentle drifting back into death. With the sound of crashing footsteps outside the hollow Arthur gave himself up to the pain wracking his insides with a wail as the body in his arms convulsed one more time, gushed cold, black, stagnant blood, and with barely a whimper it died again. Italy died again.

And Arthur was in sobbing, wracking tears with his face down on top of his cold damp hair, muffling the awful sounds coming out of him before light and heat came swelling into the dark and bloodstained hollow. He closed his crying eyes because the light hurt and he held the body tighter
because guilt made the warmth burn his skin. The large, heavy hands painted with coarse red hair along the backs made him look up, because despite his own convictions to hold on and not let go no matter what, Italy’s body slipped from his grasp and Arthur found himself pulled out into the rain with the light of several glistening white stars wrapping around his shoulders to bind him in light.

“-sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, it was my fault; it’s all my fault, I’m so sorry…” He didn’t know when he started speaking, he didn’t hear the first words, just the flood of falling despair that welled up and dropped out of him as something black and far too big to rightly squeeze into the hole vanished up into the hollow.

And oh, the sound South Italy made…

Arthur couldn’t stay on his own feet, he was too exhausted and overwhelmed for it. He felt the water soak through the blood on his knees and just sat there in the rain, a cloak of starlight trying to keep him warm as he sensed as much as outright felt Scotland fall with him, arm around his shoulders and hand on his arm trying to coax him to lift his wounded hand so his mauled fingers could be seen.

Instead he just knelt there, and he wept, and in agony he apologized and knew none of it made a difference.

Someone’s wand was given to Romano- or he found Italy’s or England’s own in the dark, something Arthur couldn’t keep track of because the last time he’d seen Italy’s wand it had been pointed at him in a duel that had made everything wrong so much worse. But South Italy found a wand from somewhere, because with a furious wail and a deafening, fire-cracker snap, both halves of Italy vanished, and they left the greater half of the United Kingdom kneeling in the dark rain and alone in the forest outside Hogsmeade, under the looming, forbidding presence of Hogwarts Castle.

And England wept.
Arthur didn’t regain his composure for a very, very long time.

Within minutes of being pulled from the tree and South Italy’s departure with his brother's body, the Hogwarts Professors were there. Desford, Huntington and Arthur’s Arithmancy Professor Rickerman were on broomsticks, and Professor Longbottom apparated across the pond with Professor Malfoy soaking wet and covered in mud up to his knees. The deep, trembling bark of a hound somewhere nearby with a lantern between the trees meant Professor Hagrid was coming, and more and more just kept filtering into view along with wizards and witches better dressed for the rain and who deferred to the professors: kind villagers from Hogsmeade itself.

"I'm sorry-" And Arthur just stayed there on his knees, arms wrapped around himself and body doubled over where he couldn't find the strength to sit up, screaming tears while Scotland tried to hush and speak for him. "I'm so sorry...!" And it worked, because the nation couldn't find a way through the charm on the human's wrist to rise back up to the surface. It was the furthest from himself Arthur had felt in three years, and he just stayed down under the weight of the wracking, choking sobs of fear and regret that had put him there.

Teachers and volunteers were handled, they were sent somewhere else, they departed on someone's orders, but Arthur couldn't hear it. He just didn't know how to cope with anything until he was wrapped up in a cloak much too large for his shuddering frame, and taken to Hogsmeade instead of Hogwarts because it was so much closer.

"That's not mud on his clothes!" Was the one solid string of words Arthur was able to hear and keep together, and it cut down on the chatter as he was pulled into someplace warm and filled with soft golden light. He couldn't remember the name of the Hogsmeade Inn right now: the three cauldrons, the five writing quills, something of that sort. He just heard the heavy sound of voices following him and felt Scotland's thick warm hand behind him at his neck, pushing him up a flight of narrow, winding stairs until a room with a bed opened up and, instead of being pushed that way, he was sent through another small door to a large white bathtub.

"I am a healer!"

"Aye, and if we be needin’ a healer, Professor Malfoy you'll be the first one I go to!"

The door swung shut and out with it went the voices, but the hand was still there, as were the horrible, weak, frightened little sounds Arthur realized he was still making and simply couldn't stop.

"What's wrong with me?" He turned right around and almost fell from the blur of white plaster walls and the sound of water gushing from a faucet instead of pattering across the ground. Scotland's hand was on the nozzle until he looked back over his shoulder, dark red beard slicked down over his jaw and dripping cold clear water to the floor, his shaggy red hair too dark and curly with the rain clinging to him. He was wearing a normal blue muggle suit, the wool sodden and heavy with rain and the crest of the United Kingdom's flag askew where it had formed the knot of his loose tie.

But it was the sympathy clouding Scotland's eyes that did him in. The wrongness of seeing that softness there was what made Arthur take two great steps back and then, unbidden, rip the words out of his own mouth:

"What's wrong with you!!" He shouted, giving a beat for Scotland to shout back at him- but he didn't! "Why are you being so nice to me? We don't like each other- you hate me!" It was a mutual
hate and they'd held onto it for centuries, for years and years ever since they'd first met! "We've fought so many times and you're always talking about leaving and-!"

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!"

Another beat, another chance for Scotland to jump on him with teeth bared and tell him he was being an idiot and a fool and acting like nothing more than a miserable little child instead of a fully grown and proper nation. Any moment now his elder brother was going to leap down his throat about how dare the United Kingdom trust Arthur of all people on a regular basis to represent them, when he couldn't even handle one rough and terrible night alone in the freezing rain and the filth and- and blood, and guilt- and death and... and danger... and... and...

"What's wrong with me...?" Arthur repeated softly, bringing his hands up to his face until Scotland was there again right in front of him, and his brother scooped up the hand where the pain had plateaued and been forgotten in the numb depths of so much weeping. Arthur's two fingers appeared so desperately tiny in Scotland's hand, the green face of his charmed watch taunting him with that fact as the three bleeding stubs of half-formed fingers continued to sting and cry in the back portion of his brain.

Adrenaline had made them heal so far so quickly, but now that he was arguably calmer, and clearly much safer, they hadn't progressed more than a scarce quarter-inch past the knuckles that had been agony to regrow.

"I can't stop crying..." he gasped.

"...Is this the blood of your ally that you're soaked with, Arthur Kirkland?" Scotland asked him, his voice so low and so grave that Arthur had to answer him clearly.

"It is."

"And these wounds," Scotland nodded to Arthur's hand which he was still holding, then lowered it where Arthur realized he'd come down to kneel in front of him so they were at proper height with each other. "They occurred suddenly, and-" There was a flicker, a motion of the eye that made his red lashes fan out before one heavy hand rose and his fingers moved under Arthur's chin, nudging his head back until he felt a frightfully kind touch across sensitive, barely there skin struggling to cope with the wounds that had been gouged through his throat. "-and very painfully, didn't they?"

"They did..."

"And you're disconnected right now," Scotland's hold on his injured hand was still there, weak, but with the same terrible kind of reverence he lifted the abused digits up and wrapped his other hand around Arthur's wrist, covering the green strap of the watch which was the only clean thing left on him. "Cut off from your people and your purpose, maybe not for the first time, but it's the most recent, and it's been going on for years now. You're exhausted."

"I am... I'm-" Scotland didn't interrupt him, it was his own relentless, miserable weeping that got in the way of any more words. "The rain was so cold."

"Then wash the blood off." It was an enchanted tub just like everything else in Hogsmeade was supposed to be: the water had run itself and stopped, and Arthur could look over at the steaming bath where there was a light, gentle scent of soap. "And let the wounds heal, and I'll make sure those two outside don't come barging in until you've had a proper night's sleep. Understood?"
"Yes..." Arthur understood. His overclocked mind picked up the pieces Scotland broke down as he tried with half-there fingers to remove the cloak pinned under his tender throat. His brother's hands were there to finish the job for him. Arthur winced when he tried peeling his shirt off over his head, stopping and hissing with the pain in his shoulder before getting it done on his own.

Scotland didn't touch or help him, but he felt the way his brother looked hard at the angry red lines running down his arm from the burns Italy had given him, then the bloody tear through his shoulder from the arrow-head. When the other tragic wound caused a weak tremble down his back trying to lift a leg up into the hot bath, Scotland drifted around the bathroom and got a look at him from behind.

"They're healing," Arthur forced the words out through the thick phlegm still choking him from tears, plunging his ankle into the steaming water and gritting his teeth at the almost-pain before the warmth convinced him to drop the rest of his leg in, arms shaking terribly just trying to keep him from falling with a splash.

"I can see that. I'm still allowed to have an opinion, ain't I?"

Most of the... 'not-mud' had been caught by Arthur's clothes, but there was still enough of everything on him that the water in the bath quickly grew murky from it all- at least it did until a sudden ripple of light over the water's surface was blinked away and he was sitting in fresh water with another dose of soap.

And it was mild soap, the sort that still stung his shoulder and aggravated his arm, his hand a beacon of pain all over again as he tried to tenderly rub his thumb and pointer finger clean, working the grime out of his palm and off his wrist and arm while the fresh skin was kept up out of the hot water. It took until the bath refreshed itself a second time when he was in the middle of washing out his hair that Arthur was finally free of the tears, and his insides were just beginning to accept the warmth being offered to him.

He took his time because Scotland didn't rush or scold him for not moving quickly. His brother also didn't any questions, and Arthur offered nothing in return. Before either of them could worry about clothes for him they realized that his stained and ruined outfit had already vanished off the floor. All it took was a glance at the bathroom counter with its lit mirror to see a set of white flannel pajamas folded neat and ready next to one of the plumpest towels Arthur had ever seen. He was dried and dressed without comment, but hesitated with Scotland still noticeably damp and possibly very cold when it came time to leave the bathroom.

Despite how much better it felt to be warm and clean, his wounds soothed by the gentle care and now only throbbing, no longer blazing and terrorizing his thoughts quite so loudly, he didn't want a discussion...

"She may have to expel you," were the first words in over twenty minutes that Scotland had uttered to him. Because continuing in absolute silence would have been enigmatic on top of rude, Arthur forced himself to take a breath and make a very solemn reply.

"Vargas died out there because of me, there's not much else she can do on top of that."

Instead of opening the door to Longbottom and Malfoy poised to rip and tear into him, the room was occupied by a single other person, and she was wearing a long, pleated gold skirt and a white apron rather like something Arthur hadn't seen since the turn of the last century. A little bit of lace and a bonnet like a tea-cozy on her curled cinnamon hair, and the stout little witch swirled around on her heel when she heard them, dropping a little curtsey by kicking one black booted foot out behind her.
Surprised by this, Scotland gave a bow and Arthur tried before his back flared with a warning shot of pain. At his soft gasp, the round-faced, very quiet woman who clearly worked for the inn gave a short huff and her entire face from her button nose to her small green eyes opened up with sympathy.

"You poor little thing!" She fusssed, “No need to explain, we've heard everything worth hearing already. Madame Rosemerta sent those two nosy grown men back up to the school for their own baths and bed, and I've brought both of you a good hot supper."

A small table with two domed silver covers was set-up behind her, but try as Arthur might he couldn't smell whatever she'd brought for them. There was a gold ribbon tied over one of the domes though, a little loop that probably meant something. Arthur was given space to sit first, injured hand behind his back, and although it hurt to sit straight up, he sat down on the side of the bed where the maid had already pulled down the covers for him. Obviously, he was expected to get right into bed after that, and did so without a fuss as he was tucked in and then presented with the same platter with that ribbon on it. The witch was quick to explain the difference:

"A few drops of a deep-sleep potion went into this one, guaranteed to keep any nasty dreams away for a night and give you some proper rest." Eating one-handed would be a pain if she was going to insist on staying- there was no sense letting anyone go running for Professor Malfoy tonight to heal his fingers, but as soon as the silver lid came off the platter Arthur stopped caring about all of that.

He hadn't known he was hungry, hadn't had the stomach an hour ago to fret about food, but a thick, rich beef stew with a roll of piping hot bread told him every necessary thing about his own needs. Food. Preferably now.

There was some chatter between the maid and Scotland, not important, not pleasant. Sentiments of relief over Arthur having been found. Concern because she was certain there had been mention of a second boy in the forest. Quieter still, a question about so much blood...

It forced his appetite to wane before he was more than half-way through the meal in front of him, and he simply sat there and let the murmuring ebb around him like water at a pond's edge. The relative silence of the inn was getting his ears to ring after so many hours of white noise- how many hours? Counting back it meant, probably... eight. Eight hours from just before dinner until right now at this inn. Eight hours in the forest. Eight hours in the rain.

Eight hours separated from every form of support or naturally occurring defense. Eight hours on something like a battlefield that was nothing like any battlefield Arthur could remember fighting on. No infantry marching over the hill to gather up the dead ally and cart them back behind the lines, no covering fire or radio crackling and blazing with orders and coordinates for a counter-strike. No human soldiers, no loyal guards, just the rain and a wand and the blood with the stink of death and raw meat...

Eight hours.

And soon, after sleep, the questions...

Waking up from sleep was a warm, pleasant feeling.

Waking up from death was not.
It was slow and it was terrible, sloughing through the cold mire like trying to wade against a persistent current. Not impossible, only terrible, hurtful, and unrelenting.

Sleep and coma were mockeries of death.

But not-death was a mockery of life.

Arthur Kirkland and Feliciano Vargas were officially suspended from Hogwarts. Their belongings from the dormitory, including all of their investigation notes and maps, were seized and held in McGonagall’s office while the demand to expel or forgive them was battled out by professors on both sides. As their combined arguments were then presented to the Headmistress, she, with greater knowledge than any of her staff on what the decision could mean for the institute, stalled.

In the meantime, Slytherin House was docked two hundred points for their unforgivable transgression. The blow dashed their house cup hopes the night before the Duelling tournament.

Arthur tried not to be bitter, but he simply couldn’t find the strength to stand straight either.

On the day of the tournament he was given fresh School Robes and a uniform at the inn, then taken directly up to the castle while the sound of breakfast was still echoing through the castle. Even as an adult, Arthur had never seen the staffroom before, but that was where he was taken with its many coloured couches and different styled seats, tables and a fireplace, lamps and glowing windows with books piled and stacked and neatly organized all around.

Arthur was made to stand in a circle of Hogwarts staff and speak to them, to answer the questions Flitwick drilled him with, and to pray that he was able to speak to Italy first before anything else could be confirmed.

He told them about Vargas hearing voices, about being called to by something no one else could see or sense. He told them why they had not gone with their friends down to Hogsmeade, because he said he’d read something in a book from the library and had wanted to show his friend that maybe there was something to discuss or work out.

He told them about the ghost that Arthur had seen which had led them around the school. He told them the way it had faded out into the distance and that Vargas had been adamant to follow, exposing the lies he’d spun for Huntington and Creevey to allow his friend to escape.

And either because Firenze was absent, or because the centaur knew the full and proper truth, Arthur came out with a little bit more:

“Something about Vargas set off Professor Firenze, and as soon as I remembered reading about centaurs in the woods, I knew I had to go after him.”

He didn’t tell them how Vargas had crossed the line first, he didn’t tell them how he’d lost Professor Longbottom so quickly, but he was caught in that second lie very quickly:

“The centaurs say you vanished twice with a loud crack.” And the ministry of Magic itself had his splinchings on record, which meant Arthur had to admit that yes, he had apparated, and he blamed his elder self for showing him the technique and for telling him how it was meant to be done.

He did not tell them fully how badly Vargas had been injured, surrendering only one chilling detail because between what the centaurs had reported and any of the professors would have seen if they’d
looked inside that hollow, it had to come out. Where there was that much blood, there must have been a critical injury.

“His arm, I... I splinched his arm off, and he passed out...” It still wouldn’t explain the blood- so much blood, but it would at least excuse why Lovino had apparated so suddenly with Scotland’s wand to get away with him. Neither Arthur nor his brother had heard anything from the Italians since that sudden leap. “I refused to leave him, I didn’t know what else to do.”

You could be arrested for splinching, you could go to prison for manslaughter, and expulsion was practically a guarantee for either action. Arthur didn’t lie out-right to name those fears because they hadn’t really been his motivation for hiding at all, but he hoped the Professors heard them, or at least made the assumption. Professor Malfoy stood directly behind Arthur for the entire hour-long interrogation until Arthur’s voice failed him, and then he was taken briskly by Professor Rickerman to an empty classroom with a locked door to sit and wait with nothing at all to occupy him.

He had to stay there because he couldn’t very well be allowed to socialize with his friends and housemates. And he had to stay there for so many hours because as soon as the tournament began, the need to ensure solidarity within the school meant Arthur was abandoned in a drafty, dark room for so long that he curled up under one of the desks for more sleep, hissing at the charm around his wrist and massaging his maimed fingers where they were at the point of constantly itching while regrowing inside a black glove. He wasn’t able to take the charm off during the tournament, because he was periodically broken in on and interrogated further by different professors as they slipped away from the parents.

Professor Desford made him feel like absolute scum by being the one to bring him a small meal between breakfast and lunch. Arthur’s first year flying teacher knelt on the floor while his sandwich and pumpkin juice were abandoned on the desk above him, and he had to endure being pleaded to over and over again about why he hadn’t called out when he must have heard her voice in the rain. She’d swept back and forth over that same pond and tree so many times, and they’d all been so terribly frightened. She begged him to tell her why he hadn’t trusted his teachers and guardians to help him and his friend when they’d needed that help the most, but Arthur couldn’t answer her. She magicked a blanket for him to rest with, and left.

The next member of staff was Professor Longbottom, whom Arthur had never seen look so stern and angry before. He entered the classroom with a bang of the door and startled him from another nap with Desford’s blanket. He came to take Arthur’s wand away, which England was extremely slow to accept- but he did ultimately surrender the oaken rod. He had a life beyond magic, a purpose outside wizardry, but the wand seemed to know that it was perhaps leaving his hand for the last time and it resisted almost as fully as Arthur himself. He’d have to hope Scotland would find a way to spare the wand even if Arthur couldn’t have it back again as a child.

But the Head of Gryffindor house didn’t come just to sternly take away a piece of his identity, he also arrived bearing the ratty, tattered black folds of the Sorting Hat in his hand. Despite how he knelt the same way Desford had on the stones, there was no pleading in his soul as he held out a hand to take Arthur’s- his wounded hand gloved and still wracked with pain he could hide, and it was placed inside the hat.

“Your friend led you into danger, but you followed in order to protect him.” There was a tingle around Arthur’s gloved hand which had nothing to do with healing anymore, and he watched the way a captain from the last Wizarding War was looking at him so firmly. It felt like the first time in years that Professor Longbottom actually chose to regard a Slytherin seriously. “You shattered laws that exist to keep students safe, and your recklessness almost killed your housemate when you did more than your skills and strength allow.” Had Arthur not been punched full of arrows and wounded
from a fight, then the splinching never would have occurred. Even if he’d leapt without the three rules fixed in his mind, he was powerful enough even with the charm that he should have been able to *force* Vargas to stay with him and remain whole at the same time.

Pride just made the reality hurt even worse…

“Your carried everything down the worst possible path, Kirkland.” Arthur felt… something? It came between Longbottom’s words and he looked down at the limp body of the hat, gloved fingers flexing inside the brim when—yes, he most certainly felt *something*. “And you made many terrible mistakes which you and your friend are going to have to live with.” What was that? No. It couldn’t be *that*. “But what you did was not *wrong*.”

Except it was. It was *that*—and *that* was what he could feel, not what Longbottom was saying. Arthur’s finger-stubs grazed what was inside the hat and then it was pushed up against his palm. His half-formed fingers and the rest of his hand all closed around it, and with a subtle pull from Longbottom the hat slipped down just enough for Arthur to look into his lap and see the ruby-studded hilt of a silver sword, his gloved hand closed around the pommel and the rest of the blade itself still hidden in the enchanted depths of the hat.

“I’m not a Gryffindor,” he whispered, wondering where his voice had gone before remembering what had happened to his throat and the way he had been made to stand there and speak. “I’m a Slytherin, Gordic Gryffindor’s enemy.” And this was Godric Gryffindor’s *sword*.

“Rival.” Professor Longbottom corrected, pulling Arthur’s gaze back up to his with the word. “No one ever builds a school with his enemy, but a rivalry can make both contenders better than who they used to be. Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin were rivals, Mister Kirkland, but they built this school together: they were friends.”

On the topic of friends, once Professor Longbottom hid the sword back in the sorting hat and left Arthur alone again without his wand, it was Professor Malfoy who appeared next with afternoon light drifting through the windows and the noise of the tournament dimming down below him. He was numb inside from everything the day before, and bored beyond consolation.

Arthur would have given anything for the latest London banking reviews, or better yet a dozen charts of Arithmancy to fuddle through than to keep counting the number of stones making up the floor (there were exactly six hundred and ninety two), the individual squares on the grated windows (eighty-seven times four), or the dusty tassels on the open curtains (fifteen tassels per curtain panel, two panels per window, four windows in the room), but if he was left here much longer he would have to count how many strands of gold cord made up the tassels themselves.

Professor Malfoy was the one to tell Arthur about the lost two hundred points while delivering him a bowl of hot chicken soup and a cup of the Professor’s specialty hot chocolate for lunch. He also informed Arthur that Slytherin had lost all six rounds of the tournament, garnering no points to make up for the devastation.

The Professor didn’t seem overly upset by any of this, at least not enough to blame Arthur for it or look askance despite how *much* of it was truly his fault. He left Arthur without an appetite and the crushing sensation of being ignored and dismissed what with how shortly he departed after arriving. It felt like a betrayal, and Arthur almost swore off the drink and food completely until he heard something on the tray rattle a little. From then on he was able to count three minute intervals between when the goblet would suddenly give a little hop and then settle down again.

Drinking the cocoa didn’t do very much for his self-esteem or loneliness since Scotland was forbidden from coming to see him, but the fact that the brass goblet (come to think of it, rather unlike
the gold and silver cups from the great hall) vanished with a puff of smoke once he drained the last of it was a thrilling surprise.

The cup itself became a letter scribbled over with Scorpius’ handwriting, the stem was from Ellie, and the base was a half-red piece of parchment which looked suspiciously like Charlie had tried to write a howler. Clutching the three letters close, he had no way of answering the myriad of questions, but the horrified tone of Scorpius’s scribbles (‘They didn’t truly take Vargas back to Italy, did they? Father says you’re in the castle but he won’t say where! Charlie’s gone absolutely batty trying to help with the tournament but they won’t let him compete!’), the muted desperation and wiped away tear-stains from Ellie, (‘Please tell us you’re alright, they took over a hundred points from both of you but they won’t say a single thing why. When I saw Professor Huntington she looked so troubled and upset and yet we all know how much she hates Feli. Please, please, remember we’re your friends and we’re here for you!’) and the righteous fury from Charlie (‘If Potter says one word and I do mean ONE WORD I’ll march over to the fourth-year match and sock him in the face I will just watch me! And when they expel me too then the three of us can go off to Italy and eat all those things Feli’s always talking about. Baker sat at our table this morning- I mean he got up and he walked over and that’s a bloke I won’t mind losing to- but I ain’t about to lose either! If it ain’t Fussy Flint an’ I in the 3rd year final you’ll be the first to hear about it!’) made it all, just a little bit, easier to bear.

Except for how the hell he was ever going to explain all of this to them…

McGonagall’s ability to stall was top-notch, because by the time Arthur was ready to fall asleep again after hiding his letters in the breast pocket of his borrowed robes, the door swung open one final time and in came Professor Huntington in a lime green robe and an exhausted look on her face. Her curls were falling flat for once and smile- two-faced or genuine, was absent.

Huntington entered the classroom with Scotland, who held out a hand for him to come quickly with a short, simple explanation.

“Until your expulsion’s decided one way or the other, you’re coming with me back to Hogsmeade.” It made sense no matter how exhausting today had been. Isolation was not a punishment Arthur was used to, especially not isolation without stimulation. “Or better yet, if it isn’t all sorted out by tomorrow then you’ll be on your way back to London, because tomorrow morning the real hard-ass of this family’s bein’ called to visit with the Headmistress. Aurors are involved now, Arthur, which means the other Mister Kirkland has to come and deal with things.”

Arthur pretended to be afraid, but he dearly wished the tears had been harder to fake as he was taken away.

In a muggle institute where logic was a basic day-to-day commodity and reason was valued alongside common sense, one brother named Arthur and a foster brother named Arthur would have been regarded critically and been worthwhile to poke around into. In a wizarding institution where things being ‘as they should be’ was a far higher priority and ‘my, well isn’t that strange!’ was an off-hand phrase heard every other day, even the fact that both Arthurs were blonde and green-eyed with similar features was simply a ‘happy coincidence’.

But that was how, after a positively miserable evening sick in his own bed in London after taking the charm off, Arthur wound up using the instantaneous effect of a Portkey the next morning on May 3rd to arrive in a properly tailored red wizarding robe. He wore the silver-edged hood down as a mantel around his shoulders, and entered Hogwarts with a greeting from the exact same Professor who had smuggled three letters to him the day before. Professor Malfoy nodded to this very different “Mister Kirkland” and brought him up through the castle.
Appearances, Arthur knew, were critical. He walked with his chin up and shoulders back, putting effort into his stride so as to appear a stern and compelling individual. He needed whatever uncanny resemblances between his true self and his charmed face to muddle away between the child’s exhausted parting tears and his foster-brother’s hard-line resolution.

“It is a very dire situation, sir.” Malfoy told him as they walked. “And not at all how I thought you and I would meet. I understand you’re a very busy person.”

“Quite.” Now enough about Arthur. “Has Hogwarts heard anything from the Vargases?” Arthur’s throat was almost completely recovered and a white turtle-neck sweater under the red robe hid the discolouration from view. Thankfully, the fact that between thirteen and twenty-something his voice had broken meant he didn’t have to mind himself, he just made sure to sound strict and short-tempered. “Our families move in the same international circles, but my calls have so far been unanswered.”

By calls, he meant two the attempts to phone Italy that morning: at South Italy’s office and again at their Roman townhouse. Arthur simply didn’t know or have a record of what number was supposed to lead to the Venetian house or any other apartments they kept in their territories. He’d tried contacting Germany for an answer, but been hit with busy signals until his aid explained the fact that Germany was going to be conference-calling Austria and Switzerland for the rest of today. Time difference meant Japan had been asleep and passive-aggressively not answering his damned phone.

“Heard something of a sort, you could say.” This was something Arthur was certain he wanted to hear, if only it hadn’t come with such a frustrated sound from the Professor as the two of them glided up a flight of stairs past a swarm of Gryffindor students. Arthur was keenly aware of his missing wand, but kept walking. “I took it upon myself to make the journey yesterday just before your brothers departed from Hogsmeade. Floo-powder and a port-key eventually got me as far as Rome, but before I could so much as ask about their family a set of Aurors and- I believe she’s Feliciano Vargas’s sister-in-law, were there to turn me away.” Meeting an angry Sicilian outside the Italian Ministry of Magic was not an experience Arthur envied the Professor for having endured.

“They treated me well enough,” Scorpius’ father continued. “A massive meal, a port-key back to London… But what I’d truly like to know is what exactly happened between those boys in the woods.” Those words were uncomfortable to hear, but Arthur held his breath rather than ask what the professor meant.

Instead they found themselves at the door to the Headmistress’s office all too soon, and after bringing him inside to McGonagall herself, Professor Malfoy departed.

“Mister Kirkland.” He rather wished Malfoy had remained behind to protect him. There wasn’t even an offer for Arthur to sit with Minerva smiling like that from behind her desk, because in a gentle voice it all began. “Might I begin our time this morning in a simple manner and ask: how dare you!”

Nothing was gentle after that.

Hearing voices and enticing spirits were both condemning signs of a possession on top of the haunting Arthur and Italy had already tried discussing before everything had so quickly fallen out of control. McGonagall screaming at him now was warranted, because Vargas should have immediately told someone once he began feeling strange.

“He told me.” And Arthur wished he hadn’t said those words. The regret did not come quickly, but waited until McGonagall had unleashed four words on England which hammered him straight back into the nearly catatonic state he’d been in after his rescue:
“And you did nothing!”

Nothing. He’d done nothing. The exact same claim he’d made to Italy before his friend and ally had completely lost himself to an unnatural anger in an already dangerous situation. Arthur had been passive, he had done nothing, and in remaining so useless he had caused every other horror that had followed.

He had done nothing. No strategies or emergency fall-backs. He had researched nothing. Planned for nothing. Passively accepted some vague notion of danger in the forest and then he, unequivocally, had done nothing about it.

And Arthur was still so far from himself, even with the charm removed and his height and presence restored, that he barely heard the rest of what came spewing from the Headmistress’ mouth before a silence rose up to spare him.

And that silence, because the Headmistress’ time was almost as valuable as the Nation’s, was soon interrupted by an announcement via picture frame that someone else had come to pay a call.

His name was Harry Potter.

That was how the Representation of the United Kingdom was relegated to stand like stone in front of the Headmistress’s desk and watch his Ministry’s Head Auror collect the cursed book and bloodstained wand reclaimed by Professor Longbottom from the forest. Auror Potter also delivered a set of red envelopes to Arthur himself, which he explained were all from the Ministry’s Transportation division regarding his ‘younger brother’s’ forays with apparition and the splinches which had resulted from it.

“I understand extreme circumstances, Mister Kirkland, so in this case I think the Ministry’s given him a bit of a break. I can’t say what the fees will be like if it happens again though.” Splinching was like the wizarding equivalent of crashing a car. The rough value of a three-hundred pound fee was surprisingly light in Arthur’s hand, especially with so much else weighing on his heart.

“The wand, Mister Potter…” He couldn’t… Arthur couldn’t let that wind up in a drawer of the Ministry. “I’m more at fault for what happened than I can readily say, I-” oh how could he even begin to explain it? “I can’t put the Vargas family through the hassle of reclaiming a wand from the British Ministry.”

Harry Potter was not an unreasonable man. There could have been so much anger and bitterness wallowing inside a soul as wronged as his, but there wasn’t. He’d been released from something terrible after the war: the sort of man who could hold his head up proud and smile easily knowing he’d done his part and then some. Honestly, the reality of what a kind man he was made the soft smile and sad green eyes under a lightning scar weigh even harder on Arthur.

“I’m afraid this wand doesn’t belong to you, sir. I can’t just go handing something like it over to just anyone. I swear though, when a Vargas comes down to the Ministry I’ll have them brought right to my office to pick it up.” His words were so honest and well-meaning, but they drained away what little agency Arthur had recovered since waking up in his own bed and being awarded the luxury of seeing his own face in the mirror.

“Perhaps it should remain here at Hogwarts.” Headmistress McGonagall stepping lightly into the exchange from behind her desk was a relief, because Arthur was already left without words. “After all, most of Mister Vargas’ other belongings are still here, and his fate has not yet been properly decided.”
“You do know where I stand on that issue, of course.” Dressed up in a black waistcoat and suit, Auror Potter had a stately, professional way about him that somehow excused him to weigh in on an issue which Arthur had spent the last two days being dead centre of. “No one except the two boys in question was harmed—albeit terribley.” Even the courteous look Potter gave Arthur at the mention was difficult to bear. “But the rule-breakers, I for one believe, have been punished. Not to mention their house and their friends. It’s rather like kicking a dead horse to take things any further, especially with what you’ve just told me about a possession being involved.”

Arthur met Auror Potter’s eyes one more time and then returned his gaze to McGonagall to avoid it. That was the last of what was said before Potter agreed to hand Italy’s wand back to the Headmistress. With a polite nod and an honest good wish for ‘the younger Mister Kirkland’ to recover soon and keep his spirits up, England’s magical saviour departed.

And so too did Arthur after a long and emotionally exhausting afternoon taken to establish, decisively, that there could be no ruling or confirmation of anything until Italy recovered enough to speak. And by the sounds of things from Professor Malfoy, was not going to be soon.

“And just what do you expect me to tell my staff in the meantime?”

“I don’t know, Ma’am…” Without North or South Italy to testify, there was no way to properly rule which way the investigation was going to go. Arthur made no secret to McGonagall, charmed watch in a velvet box hidden back in London, that he had no honest idea how they could continue. It all depended on what Italy would have to say when he woke up.

“Then perhaps you should consider paying Mister Vargas a visit while enjoying your suspension from Hogwarts.”

“I can promise to try, Headmistress, but not that anything will come of it.” His odds were only marginally better than Professor Malfoy’s when it came to getting a proper reception into Italian territory, nevermind being physically allowed into Italy’s presence… But Feliciano wasn’t the kind to hold a grudge, not really. And maybe he could be counted on to control South Italy if things came down to it.

Maybe…

Death for their kind was not really death at all.

Death for the embodiment of an identity fractured across millions of souls, centuries of history, thousands of miles of territory, and countless cultural triumphs and insecurities was laughable. They were as terrestrial gods: immortal to the very last of their kind and poised to fall only after a hundred million other dreams had perished first and their memories lost to time and its tireless twisting.

A singly synapse in a nation’s brain was the storm rolling over the mountain or the crash and clank of industry on rocky coasts. It was the zing and burn of market numbers colliding in cyberspace, it was ten million voices booming over air-ways and telephone lines, school bells and cash registers and sirens and phone calls. The scream of pencil on paper, chalk over slate, workers lifting and hawkers crying.

It was all the noise of a hundred strips of film fed through a single machine at once, clashing and confounded and noise, noise, noise. Noise that burnt the skin and fried the self-same flesh which produced it, a backlash of awareness that left nothing substantial to cling to, to remember, to
recognize.

Until a silver band cut across the images, constricted itself tight around a mind half-formed, and like a hangman’s noose foreign magic drew itself closed before an ageless awareness could scream and fight it off. The connection was choked back in a way it never had been before, and the disorienting pain of resurrection was interrupted by the strangling reality of a faulty drop from rickety gallows. A spirit left struggling to reclaim its form with toes dangling inches above the fertile ground, neck unbroken but body dangling in the half-light of consciousness.

So Feliciano Vargas drew a silent breath in agony, but North Italy rejected the curse on its vessel and left the body to expire again out of spite. This happened twice in three short days.

The third day ended with the last member of the Italian Charms and Hexes division telling South Italy exactly what he’d known all along. It left him with no more reason to hesitate because the truth was brutal and clear: England had cursed North Italy’s body and transformed it into something inhospitable for the nation’s soul to reattach to.

So South Italy fired the threat to snap Scotland’s wand in half if they weren’t on the flight Lovino booked for them, or otherwise found a faster way of getting from London to Venice.

No more games.
Scotland had given his wand to South Italy so he could apparate.

Arthur’s wand had been confiscated by the school.

To apparate without a wand was possible, but excessively difficult and even more danger-prone than doing it normally. Most wizards couldn’t even fathom apparating as far as two feet without their wands in hand, so nation or not there was no plausible way for them to try jumping across Europe— it would be hard enough just getting across the Channel...

“What did you do?”

“I haven’t got a damned clue.”

But airports were like a second home to most members of their circle. Arthur was out of practice after three years playing charades at Hogwarts, but Scotland wasn’t and his overnight bag didn’t even need packing: it was just ready to go. Arthur’s took no more than fifteen minutes to put together and then they were in the taxi on the way to Heathrow for a flight down to Rome, two digital tickets resting in Scotland’s smart-phone from Romano to get them on a smaller flight up to Venice.

“You know you didn’t have to come.” There was meager conversation during both flights. Not unpleasant, but as they were hurrying through Rome’s main airport for their connection, no bags to check because the over-night cases were acceptable carry-on, they did snap at each other a little bit.

“Things aren’t as they were three years ago.” A nation’s passport was different than most. “You’re England, yeah, but I’m Britain now.” Diplomatic Immunity was a given, and in most modern airports now there was an automatic flag that went up as soon as one of them was booked onto a flight and their passports scanned at digital terminals world-wide.

“Mister Kirklands!” Which was why they bypassed every single line-up, were seated and disembarked first, flew first class and had a driver waiting for them in Venice when they stepped out into daylight no more than five hours after leaving London. A great deal slower than magical travel, but it worked.

“I don’t think I like it, really; you being Britain.”

“Well it’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?”

A car could only take one so far into Venice: canals being a bit of bother for tires and what-not. The same e-mail with their flight details had included a set of digital train tickets as well, and upon arrival in the floating city the two of them simply had to walk.

Arthur hadn’t been to Italy’s Venetian home in, oh, at least thirty years if it was the same one that he remembered. He certainly didn’t remember how to get there. Thankfully, the two nations and their luggage weren’t out on the street for more than five minutes before the next link in South Italy’s chain arrived.

“You are the Kirkland Brothers?”

The English was heavily accented, functional, but also used in a brisk manner that made both of them turn while Scotland had his phone to his ear trying to call Romano for further directions. The phone was put away in the warm May sunlight, and the two of them turned around in the daily din of
the city to find the speaker. The narrow street was suddenly very empty, and it was like the ancient city around them suddenly held its breath for whatever reason.

The woman who approached them was almost non-descript at first, like there was something wrong with her face and body so Arthur could see all the details of her clothes, but as soon as his eyes ended their sweep he could recall nothing except a vaguely dark outfit and a purposeful stride.

“Aye, that’s us.” He let Scotland speak for them, acknowledging very softly to himself that despite economics and population, perhaps he really had allowed his elder brother to become Britain in his stead. “Are you here to take us to the Vargases?”

“I am.” Even her voice was impossible to keep hold of. It wasn’t especially high or low, her accent was Italian but Arthur had no grasp of where it was from within the country. It didn’t carry the tone of emotion: no light play or bitter resentment, it was just words moving through the air with information and instruction. “This way.” They followed because this was their guide and they had no better path to walk.

They followed her for roughly ten yards and then immediately ducked down an impossibly tight alleyway between two crumbling white buildings. An arch in one of the walls opened up into a garden filled with spring blossoms, and then she took them through another arch in the adjacent garden wall and down a flight of warped steps to the edge of one of the city’s smaller canals.

And then she hopped right out onto the water, and kept walking even after their little concrete platform struck a dead-end against another building. Baffled and not exactly willing at first, Arthur took a deep sigh and collapsed the handle on his rolling luggage, getting a hand around the top of the little suit-case before, senses fanned out, he tossed himself over a small bubbling current of green city water.

He might as well have jumped from concrete to concrete, because with the soft hum of magic under his shoes, he was perfectly dry and capable of hurrying up after their guide. Scotland scoffed and swore a little before mimicking him, but they caught up with her at a corner where she settled for a few seconds to make sure they didn’t fall too far behind.

“Perhaps you could give us your name-? Your rank maybe?”

“English is not…” Her voice faded, but again it didn’t sound like proper hesitation, it simply dropped off without warning. “How to say…?”

“My Italian isn’t beautiful,” Feeling like he understood the matter a little better with that last comment, Arthur swallowed his pride and changed over. “But it’s certainly functional. Is this better?”

“Thank you, yes. My name is Francesca Benzo, Auror Second Class of Venezia.” He didn’t honestly know what the Class rankings meant in Italy, but with her voice maintaining that terrible monotone Arthur didn’t ask any questions beyond that. Auror Benzo continued down the canal until they reached an iron gate leading under one of the city’s islands, he didn’t know which one, and without flinching she continued walking straight through what he’d thought was solid metal.

Of course the nations followed, and they were guided as much by the Auror’s hovering form as they were the ambient green light of the canal water lapping under their feet. Whatever they were suspended on, it didn’t allow for footsteps to echo over the drip of wet stones and the far away rumbles of the muggle city.

The three main features of Wizarding Venice were canals, fountains, and staircases. Auror Benzo left
the canal up a dark flight of stairs Arthur wouldn’t have seen had her shadow not changed position, and then they were left trekking almost straight up what must have been two stories of steep steps. They were greeted by a square sunlit garden much like the one they had already passed through before reaching the canal, the sky open above them with power-lines dripping with moss and balconies spiralling up around the garden, the light sound of voices and far-away radios droning in the spring afternoon. A fountain in the centre was splashing gently as they hurried through a doorway and then down another flight of stairs.

These steps only went down about one level into a tunnel, and then Arthur and his brother were loaded into a gondola with bright blue and white decorations. A lion-head was mounted on the prow as the witch boarded last and kicked off the rope tethering them to the launch pad.

“Definitely not the muggle house then…” There was no way they were headed to the house Arthur did half-remember, and he had to wonder why the witch hadn’t simply apparated them or located a fireplace. Maybe Floo-Powder was more British than Arthur had thought.

“There is a muggle doorway, but this is much faster.” Auror Benzo only let the gondola sail for a few minutes before jumping off onto a set of steps which Arthur had not properly seen, rope in hand which she looped twice without knotting around a large pole submerged in the canal tunnel floor.

They climbed one more flight of steps, and instead of a garden this time the Auror opened a door which led to a pleasantly modern looking entry-way and den. There was no television but that was about the only thing missing, low white couches, aged wooden floors, fresh plaster walls and large works of Italian oil painting hanging on the walls- magical portraits by the way, things which moved and made soft noises in their frames. Plants, animals, no people whom Arthur could see as he was let inside and set his suitcase down in the corner next to a large potted plant.

“Did you walk?”

The brothers and their guide were standing in a large room with two corridors branching off with destinations unknown. There was plenty of daylight which meant they were somehow above ground, and South Italy’s voice when they heard it was harder to place than the house itself in relation to the rest of the city.

“Well you didn’t exactly make it easy.” Arthur replied, hearing a fast quip of Italian telling the Auror she was dismissed. When Auror Benzo turned to leave, there was finally enough light and time for Arthur to see the edge of the eye-boggling field around her, a stretch of arm clearly defined and easily seen with a heavy ring on her short finger and the pleated leather of an Auror’s defensive armor before whatever confounded his gaze fell back into place and she vanished out through the door and into the canal network again. It was a shroud of some sort then.

Footsteps and South Italy very suddenly being directly in front of Arthur almost made him take a step back. There were no magical robes or hellfire crawling around Italy’s elder brother, but in a white office shirt and simple grey slacks he still looked menacing.

“I should break your fucking neck.” And then he got a right in front of Arthur, so deeply in his personal space that he almost stepped back- but his spine hardened before he could make that mistake, and England did not back down to Italy.

“What’s the matter with you?” He said peevishly, “I only just got here!”

“Vargas you called and we came, now what’s all this about?” Arthur stood his ground, but so did the host nation- and wasn’t that a strange sensation? That Italy Romano should feel menacing and in
control in Venice of all places. Unwillingly, Arthur did, slowly, step back from the frightful look in the other nation’s green eyes.

“He knows why!” Was the accusation South Italy flung at him, and Arthur just hiked his shoulders up a little higher at the incessant drama!

“I do not!” He snapped sharply, standing straight and jerking his coat down around his shoulders so it was pressed and proper. “I don’t know what he’s told you, but I’ve got just as many questions to drill into that thick skull of his-” The sudden appearance of a finger waving in front of his nose was equal parts insulting and yet strangely curious. At least it wasn’t a gun as South Italy growled his next words:

“You’re going to watch your mouth around me when you speak of my brother.” He meant that threat. Whether he was inclined to reinforce it through magic or politics didn’t matter. Looking at him properly now, Arthur was surprised with the sleepless look haunting the other nation. South Italy hadn’t shaved recently, maybe yesterday but there was a dark fringe of a beard creeping across his cheeks, chin and upper lip. His dark hair from this close was limp from being unwashed, his shirt collar wilted where Arthur hadn’t been paying attention. He’d known they were coming but hadn’t fixed himself up at all trying to intimidate them. South Italy wasn’t making a play by acting like this: he was just as furious on the inside as he was borderline out of control on the outside. “Especially after what you did to him.”

Those words calmed Arthur’s anger.

“What’s wrong with him?”

South Italy didn’t answer, he just turned around on his heel and marched away back through the house. It was as good as verbal order for them to follow.

“Did you bring your wand? Scotland, I still have yours.”

“Aye you do. I’ll be takin’ it back now if it please you, Vargas.”

“Hogwarts confiscated mine.” The words were bitter in Arthur’s mouth.

The way South Italy pulled an about-face meant the two of them almost ran into each other, and the fast, hard grab at Arthur’s collar as he was jerked forward and then shoved back almost sent him flat on his back.

“Then go get it back!”

“What’s wrong with him!?” but Arthur knew enough about his own weight and balance now that his body was itself again. He did not fall, and he was fast enough to charge forward and slip under South Italy’s arm when the other nation tried to block him. He came up standing straight again and turned around, walking slowly backwards to get further into the house with both hands up and open in case he was attacked again. “Yelling at me isn’t going to make a difference, Romano! Where is he? Which door?”

He was awake, wasn’t he? He had to be for his brother to be acting like this and making demands left and right! When South Italy didn’t charge him again or try to tackle him for getting past his defenses, he just stood there huffing and growling like an outraged beast before flinging an arm out to Arthur’s left. It was as good as telling him to turn and look that way down the hall, something Arthur did and immediately started walking.

The corridor was not wide, and it was punctuated with several doors: most of which led nowhere. A
linen closet, a bathroom, an office with a cauldron in the centre instead of a computer desk, a spare bedroom all opening and shutting as he passed before he hit the room he was meant to find.

There was nothing overly elaborate about any of these rooms, nothing like Malfoy Manor or the grand mystique of Hogwarts. When Arthur hit the plain white and blue bedroom where Feliciano lay he could hear the two elder nations beginning to bicker and argue in the chamber he'd left behind.

At first he thought the bed against the wall was empty, but then he saw tiny feet barely half-way down the length of it under the rich midnight blue blankets. The white face of a Venetian lion was blazed across the covers and the bedspread was the most elaborate thing in the chamber; the bed itself could have come from any muggle furniture store along with the desk and square armoire.

A small hand, short limbs: Arthur was shocked when he found himself looking at the sleeping body of a child instead of the recognizable face of the Italian Republic. Crossing the room quickly, he saw the cross and chain laying flat against Italy’s throat but ignored wherever the rest of the chain must have fallen, grabbing his hand where it was outside the covers across his chest. Arthur’s meager hopes crashed as soon as he touched the cold, rigid skin. There was no heartbeat and his nails were dark from lack of blood flow.

Picking at the dark blankets, from the shoulder down to his elbow North Italy’s arm had restored itself, but Arthur was very ginger about pulling the heavy covers back to get a better look at him.

Feliciano wasn’t wearing a shirt, but his hand had yet to reform where his arm ended in a massive cloud of white gauze. Arthur tried to hoist the blankets back a little more when he was given a very serious warning.

For one: he hadn’t even known Feliciano’s cat Gino was in the room, let alone hiding under the covers tucked against its master’s wounded side. For another, he’d never heard the animal hiss before, nevermind the low, dangerous growl that rumbled out from behind that large bundle of loosely strung bandages. Gino blocked whatever Arthur could have seen of Feliciano’s mauled torso, ears back, green eyes wide, and teeth bared as it hissed and yowled like a snake and reached one paw out with claws extended warning him to back away now or risk a repeat of his splinched fingers.

“Alright, alright…” Quickly lowering the blankets back down and smothering the noise and the furious animal, Arthur crossed around to the other side of the bed just as he heard footsteps and glanced over to see South Italy standing there with arms folded over his chest. Everything about him screamed defense and tension, not unlike the Familiar Arthur had just disturbed.

“Figured it out yet?”

“No.” Arthur sniped back, not in the mood to play detective for too much longer. “Is his torso any better? Gino didn’t want me getting too close to it.”

“Neither do I, but here we are.” Arthur raised his arms high at that comment, not touching Feliciano’s bedside anymore and taking a shuffling step to rest his weight equally on both feet.

“Why? Why do you have to be like that?” He asked, gesturing to himself and then down at the child on the bed. “I’m asking you what’s wrong and you’re acting like I want state secrets. How about this then: why is he still wearing the charm? It’s not going to do anything for or against him, but why?”

South Italy’s jaw tightened up briefly, the corner twitching before he slipped one hand free and gestured to his brother as if inviting Arthur to do something. A very cold bit of dread slipped unwarranted into Arthur’s gut at the gesture, and he suddenly looked back down at the charm resting
around Feliciano’s throat.

Both of his hands went for it, one lifting the cross and the other feeling along the chain for the slack he expected- oh God.

Oh Lord, it was tight.

“Why didn’t you take it off?” Arthur’s hex was still in place, oh God why would anyone leave it on like this!?

“I can’t.” South Italy finally stopped standing there like a statue and Arthur dropped his hold on the cross and chain like the silver had burnt him. In fact, looking down at it now- no…!

“Your ministry-” The silver was tarnished. Not where he’d touched it specifically but just all along it. In three years Italy had never polished it once, it was in the relic’s nature not to require that sort of care.

“I’ve had eight Enchantment specialists through his house in the last three days.”

“No, no that doesn’t make any sense, it just doesn’t.” Hands rising to rest on his hips, Arthur shook his head and heard himself nattering on about how that was wrong and not right at all, “Scotland!” The only person with a damned wand in the house needed to be in this room right now, but as soon as he appeared with that dark, menacing look on his face Arthur immediately lifted both hands to stop the assault.

“You fuck-up.”

“I panicked!” Arthur shouted, throwing the words hard into the ground so they could leave a mark. “I panicked and I made a mistake! I own that! I accept that! Now help me fix it, Scotland, God damn it.”

“You know what these charms look like on the inside, you backwards dimwit!” but of course Scotland still felt like sinking his teeth in! Of bloody course! “You know how many layers of enchantments are bound up in that cross and watch and you know how intricately it’s all laid out so none of it collapses on itself! You know, because that’s what makes you sick as a dog when you take it off!”

“It was a minor change in mass!”

“You can’t transfigure something like that when it’s in effect, you moron!”

“Enough.” When Italy Romano had to be the voice of reason it was a sign that the world truly had gone completely batty! “I didn’t call you here to argue, I called you here to fix it. Now fix it.”

“We should at least wait for him to wake up first before trying anything.” Turning around to see such a wide and chilling smile on South Italy’s face just made Arthur's hackles rise all over again.

“Oh, we should?” was the question their host offered him in a most unpleasant manner. “Funny how I didn’t think of that myself.”

“Stop that.” Arthur rebuked. “Whatever it is rotting away inside your head, do us all a favour and just spit it out already!” But there was something in what Romano had just said, a dangerous hint that meant Arthur had to slow down and hesitantly go back over the conversation and all its twisting accusations. The worst part of it was South Italy actually giving him the time to think it through.
Eight wizards he’d said. South Italy had intentionally brought an entire magical department through his brother’s room to deal with the charm and that wasn’t the sign of a mild irritant or a frustrating insult. For South Italy, for Italy Romano to call on enchanters and magic workers with whom he’d sworn off contact almost thirty years ago, there was no petulant way of rationalizing it. There had to be a need behind a decision like that.

“You aren’t seriously suggesting that the charm is somehow getting in the way of his recovery.” Arthur phrased the fear as a challenge, but he still broke eye-contact with Romano to summon Scotland and his wand to the bedside with a frantic look.

“And if I am?” No. No, absolutely not: that wasn’t allowed to be the case. But the way South Italy’s voice fell with those words transformed his statement into a threat Arthur’s bravado couldn’t match. “Either he’s putting it off on purpose or that train-wreck of a spell you strangled him with—”

“No! He tried coming back in the forest so that can’t be it!” Ah- Arthur could feel it again. Deny it though he tried he could still feel the anxiety beginning to bubble up and distract him again. A furious sting in his ear not unlike the squelch of thick mud or the constant hiss of rain…

“He heard your voice just before we were rescued, and he came back for it.” His voice felt soft as it moved out of him, Arthur stepping aside so Scotland had better access with his wand to the cross and chain on the boy laying still on the bed. Arthur walked around the room slowly to stand directly in front of South Italy, eyes cast down into an empty corner of white plaster and daylight as he made himself continue speaking: “That proves he can hear. He heard you and he tried to answer when he was still too injured to come back all the way. I was with him, I felt it, so there’s nothing you can say to make me believe he’s dead to the world now because of that magic and my mistake.”

“I’m not denying that he can still touch this world if he needs to, England.” Hearing South Italy deal with an important issue like this with a low, reserved tone of voice was almost frightful. Romano was the half of Italy who screamed and shouted and swore in other nation’s faces. He was known for throwing insults and items when his temper was properly riled or he felt threatened enough to start a fight. It wasn’t like him at all to stand here so seriously and pay the issue so much reverence, enough so that he almost sounded empathetic to Arthur’s words.

Empathy was not sympathy. One implied that the speaker felt bad for and was offering pity to the other party, but what South Italy was doing now was offering a half-way point between his anger and the shame Arthur was resisting so heavily. He’d been made to feel like filth for days now, culpable and guilty and wrong and unforgiven, but he was fighting against it now. Yes, he had done wrong, but how far were they going to drag him through the blood until the wolves around him were satisfied?

So having Feliciano’s brother offer him empathy was just another layer of conflict in Arthur, because he wanted to accept that hand but at the same time he wanted to reject the fact that there was even a reason for it. He was being illogical, but damn it he was tired. One mistake. One mistake which had cascaded into another and another had brought them here, and Arthur was too strong and proud a nation to continue crying sorry and weeping misery for the benefit of others. He was sorry and he knew there were more apologies to give, but he refused to make any more of them from his knees.

Scotland might have moved into Arthur’s place as Britain, but Arthur was still England.

“I don’t have to explain to you that if Veneziano was in extreme distress then I would know.” Extreme distress he said, as opposed to the obvious pains which came from half-life and cold, motionless slumber. “Your United Kingdom functions similarly to how we do, so even before his body stopped healing or his industries slowed down or stumbled, I would still be able to feel something.”
“And can you?” Arthur already had proof that Feliciano was healing because of his arm. For market numbers, all he’d need was an hour or two with an internet connection and his digital contacts list to find out whatever he needed to know about Italy’s public works and economic situation.

“He’s asking what the weather’s like outside your window.” Scotland’s interjection was maddening and stupid, but the sharp whistle between his teeth and the flip of his hand for Arthur to come back around the bed helped the younger brother forgive him. It didn’t seem to matter whether South Italy answered either question, because Scotland had his own answers for the original problem.

“I’ll stop calling you a moron once you fully understand what you did wrong.” His brother explained, taking Arthur by the hand and then holding his wand out over North Italy again. South moved closer to stand across from them and carefully watched the magic, but there was no reasonable way to fault him for his mistrust.

Strands of starlight had formed from the end of Scotland’s dark wand and were attached like spider’s silk to the links of the chain and the white crystals set on the cross. When Arthur touched his brother’s hand, a sparkle of gold light travelled along those strands and sank into the tarnished metal with a shimmer.

“All three of us put our magic into these tokens: North Italy, England and Scotland.” The explanation was more for South Italy’s benefit than Arthur’s, but he didn’t interrupt. “There was a good balance struck when we did it, and that three-part mix has been keeping these two idiots from treating it like an allergy or an attack. Should make sense to ya’: no nation in their right mind or out of it would tolerate bein’ restricted or cut off from themselves by foreign energies, gotta have just enough of the host involved in the mix to keep it safe.”

As Scotland spoke, Arthur’s eyes watched a ribbon of green light wrap and weave itself through the chain, painting the gems of the cross green and wrapping over half the links. It was visible to all three of them because South Italy’s hand moved to hover over his brother’s slumbering body and then pulled back. Next came a band of blue energy which mimicked the path of the green around Italy’s throat, and Arthur felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise slightly when his senses half picked up on a hum coming from his brother’s fuller frame standing next to him. So those were the Scottish and Italian bands…

Oh no…

“But then this arsehole, as was already said, fucked it up.”

There was no band of colour for Arthur’s magic, just an angry, sour guilt poisoning his insides as what looked like twigs and branches started to form within the gaps between the chain links. They were brown, thorny things like untended roses, thorns spreading out and prickling the skin around Italy’s throat, a bed of sharp leaves growing out around the cross and covering the green gemstones, the blue Scottish energy retreating in the wake of the brown mass hardening and constricting, binding up the links so they formed a hard, woody collar that smothered the other two kinds of power.

“But Arthur’s right: he ain’t as dead as he looks, are ya, Vargas?”

It was a very forthright thing for Scotland to say, but when Arthur looked up and saw the pale, milky white light filtering through his brother’s half-open eyes where he was looking down at the other nation’s body, England understood.

Working his hand free of Scotland’s grasp, he let his brother sink heavily into the magic he was already working. The play of light and colour across the chain to represent the unseen forces resting
inside of it and afflicting Italy’s body faded with the loss of contact, but Scotland’s wand was still connected to the charm by way of those rapidly multiplying strands of starlight. South Italy was watching the magic intently, but when Arthur stepped around the bed to speak to him his host was surprisingly gracious.

“My wand is in the headmistress’s desk,” Arthur stated in a low, hushed voice at South Italy’s shoulder. “But you must have an alternative somewhere in this house.”

A slow, unsteady breath in was all Feliciano’s brother gave him at first, but with Scotland falling further into his casting and Lovino himself unable to help the situation due to not being involved in the original casting, eventually there was an unwilling reply.

“You can use whatever you can find in that office.” It wasn’t much, but it wasn’t antagonizing or rude.

“Thank yo-”

“No. Don’t thank me, Kirkland.” But the follow-up was closer to both of those words, as was the wide-eyed green stare Arthur received when his host turned his head just enough to force the eye-contact. “Just fix him.”

So that was exactly what Arthur committed himself to doing.

When Feliciano finally woke up, it was not kind.

It was pain.

It was always pain but it didn’t matter how many times it happened, how many hundreds of time he went through it or was ready for it. It was pain and it was always the same kind of pain that he could never prepare himself for mentally, because physically it was always the same and it was always worse than he could handle.

Because there always was a moment to stop and prepare for it. That half-second on the edge of sleep right before reality came back and eyes opened to colour and movement and ears unplugged from the silence of sleep to murmurs and voices and far away things.

But death was not sleep. It was the same hesitation as waking up from a long night’s sleep or a comfy mid-afternoon nap, but death was not sleep.

It was the same breath, and then it was blinding, crippling reality.

He felt his eyes open but then he went blind from the fire that ripped through his nerves and lacerated the dead grey matter inside his head. Every synapse was a full electric jolt that forced sensation where it wasn’t meant to be. He took a breath to scream but the air was stopped by misplaced, long-cold blood laying stagnant and heavy in his chest. When he couldn’t breathe, his abdomen constricted and through the stinging bath of needles ripping down every inch of skin, his shoulders came up, his head was lashed back, and-

“Breathe! Breathe, it’s-” And half-words became a thundering roar of scrambled nerves and wild feedback. He heard it but he also felt the rip and crack of fluid bursting from his ears, blades of sensation slicing down his throat as his jaw unhinged with only a sense of weight, not balance, he was pushed aside before it came out:
Out, not in, there, not here. Orienting himself in space was a pitiful and slow effort, exacerbated by the gush of rotten meat and thick waste that spewed from his body as his ribs clamped tight and every muscle convulsed on their own to force the filth up his throat and out through his numb mouth. He couldn’t taste it, the blood or the bile, it was awareness divorced from sensation that told him he spewed less than half of what needed to come out before collapsing.

“Out, both of you.”

“At least let us help clean him up!”

Voices, more voices he felt slapping his skin as the pain abated and left him shivering, shaking, half-conscious and slipping back towards a darkness he couldn’t surrender too again. Darkness at the bottom of an incline he dug toes and fingertips into the rock to avoid, back and limbs screaming with the force of wrestling everything that he was up a mountain of soul rending pain.

The first time his heart pumped, Feliciano’s body vomited again.

He felt something hot through the stinging and realized it was a heavy hand on the back of his neck, holding his head poised until the violence was over and he was eased back down on something flat and almost soft. Not skin, it was too cool against his sweating face, but maybe a bed…

“You did what I asked now get out of here.” Maybe his brother- that voice, maybe it was South Italy standing over him. But it could have just as easily been Rome too. That deep timber, those thick, warm fingers in his hair… “Go wait outside!” But that language…

Not Latin.

Not Italian.

No language native to his shores.

No language that had any place in his city.

And it was his city he could feel it now: he knew it now. He could taste it in the first breath he took through parched lips and over the smothering tang of black blood. He could hear it over the ringing and pounding in his skull like a mother’s voice cooing through the wood and stones, slipping past the words shooting back and forth over his head as sound came rocketing back to argue with Rome-with Romano who was still touching him and was the only one allowed to touch before the white lightning crack of his memory unlocked-

Darkness and the hiss of rain, the blinding pain he couldn’t stop because he didn’t even feel it start it was already there it was just there and it was everything.

No-

Rain so cold it’s like pellets of ice falling from the sky. Greedy fingers draining the warmth out of him. Physically pulling the warmth out of him because the debilitating pain is worse than being shot. It’s worse than being shot or being stabbed or falling from a horse or being caught in a flipping car. It’s not the stomach-chilling fear of a jet falling out of the sky or the freak accident of a lightning strike on a building unprepared for the assault. The muted panic of flailing against flames and falling to ash in the hungry fire comes close, but the paralysis is worse than poison because it isn’t clotting his blood, it’s stealing it.

NO-
Stealing and discarding and leaving him to lie in it, just lay there feeling it leave him because the wound is gruesome and it's mortal but it isn't instant like the fall of an axe or decapitating swing of a sword. He isn't crushed before he can react or blasted to smithereens by the bomb hidden under his booted foot or dropped over his head.

Feliciano was lying on his arm and he pulled it out from under him, hand reaching up and around his body because something was wrong. It was wrong and it had been wrong in that rain and that cold and that night, and it was still wrong now.

“Don’t argue with me, Kirkland!”

Kirkland.

Something was wrong.

Daniel.

Arthur.

Arthur Kirkland.


His hand found his other shoulder and it swept down, it found tender skin still enflamed from the first jolt of life, found the fetal bend of his elbow and the first too-tight, cutting straps of gauze and then nothing. His hand found nothing.

Nothing.

No arm, no hand, no limb, no-

“O-ut!”

Whichever way the sound left him, it gurgled and spilt over blood like a thick matte, a paste so heavy it gummed up between his jaws and was spat and retched out by his heaving, enflamed gut where his hand went next and wrapped around tender ribs and barely-formed muscles, the bones almost touching air because the skin was so thinly stretched over the wound.

“Out! Of Venice! Out!” Out of his city, out of his home, out of his heart, his birthplace, his birthright, his sanctuary, his stronghold, his Venice: get out of Venice-!!

Killer!

Murderer!

Liar!

“OUT!”

KIRKLAND-

“OUT OF VENICE!!”
La Serenissima

Italy clawed and ripped his way back to life within minutes of the charm’s removal. His fully grown form had only lain silent on that bed for a few moments after the last of the fairy lights died before slowly tensing up, blooming with the red of restored blood-flow, and then convulsing in the all-too familiar and forever horrible battle between slipping back into death but resisting in the effort to find life.

He screamed like an animal and Arthur and Scotland both understood that they had to obey what South Italy had already shouted at them: to leave the room and go to any other part of the house until everything in that chamber calmed down and they could come back and help look after him.

There were any number of things to occupy them, and in an effort not to hear the sounds of weeping or the running water that started in another part of the house to bathe and soothe the distressed nation, Arthur listened to Scotland make two business phone calls and stood by the window watching muggle boats pass silently by on the canals outside the house. Spring time in Italy was always lovely, and the sunlight glittering off the green waters of the lagoon were no exception.

About an hour after North Italy woke up, South Italy finally stepped back into the main sitting room of the apartment looking tired but no less functional for all the stress.

“I should have you thrown out of this fucking city.” He spoke in such a dismal tone of voice that Arthur wasn’t sure how serious he was being.

“Is he alright?” Was a more important question, and it was what pulled Arthur up off the chair he’d brought over to the window

“His insides are a fucking mess because of you.” Again, harsh words delivered in a mild tone. South Italy let a long, slow breath out and closed his eyes, one dark hand rising to rub at his eyes and cover half his face for a few moments as he slowly moved through what exactly was on his mind. “But he’s asleep for now. When he gets up the four of us—” A gesture to the three nations in the room, Scotland included where he’d put his phone away and was listening closely with one arm draped over the back of the couch he was sitting in. “are going to have a long talk about this Hogwarts shit.”

“Like how to explain things when we drop out?” Arthur offered in a gentle voice.

“Exactly.” South Italy readily agreed. “So go take your shit down that hall and pick a room to stay in, you’re gonna be here a while.”

And they were, but in the meantime South Italy was an exceptional host. That was typically how things had always worked out when it came to the Italian brothers hosting conferences and meetings: North Italy would be in charge of most of the business-business aspects of the trip, the socializing and the agendas and the why-isn’t-the-projector-working, but the between things were all filled in by South Italy: hotel bookings, meal times and preparation, issues with laundry or tailoring or missing luggage, train and air tickets for travel to and from various destinations. For decades they worked as a well-oiled social machine which bellied their financial and institutional issues.

So South Italy didn’t even need to pop out for groceries, he already had all the food things necessary to cook for four people and keep his guests comfortable in rooms freshly aired and beds newly made with washed sheets. Arthur wasn’t particularly fond of coffee, but Romano had a tin of the same brand of tea he habitually kept in London and opened that for the first time to serve him and his brother that afternoon.
They discussed work and current events, bringing Arthur up to speed on how Japan’s 2020 Olympic Games had gone in February and easily queuing up sports reels online and from commemorative DVDs: things which hadn’t translated well via letters.

And after night had fallen and the electric lights in the “wizard” house were slowly turned on, neither Arthur nor his brother questioned when South Italy turned suddenly and then stood up and walked away from them back down the hall where his brother’s room lay. There came the muffled sound of voices, a little bit of soft, slow conversation, and then finally enough noise to suggest someone getting up and moving around.

Arthur made sure he was standing, sleeves tugged down properly and then hands behind his back, shoulders straight and head up. When Italy slowly, sluggishly, walked into view around that bend in the wall, Arthur could see the dark circles swallowing his eyes and noticed the loose hang of his empty white sleeve. Even with his brother standing next to him, North Italy didn’t cling to South for support as he moved slowly, but purposefully, over to the long, decorative wooden table where the rest of them had already eaten and cleared away their dinner dishes. South Italy stepped out of Arthur’s immediate sights for a moment to crack open a bottle of wine, and North Italy grasped the carved back of one of his chairs and took his deliberate time maneuvering it back so he could sit down.

He looked exhausted, and resentful on top of things, but he also used his remaining hand to gesture down the table for Arthur and Scotland to sit while his brother returned with a tall glass of red wine. He drank from that first while Arthur and Scotland slowly choose seats across from each other and a space down from Italy himself. The table sported enough chairs for at least eight people to rest comfortably.

The boy from Hogwarts resembled the nation who had gone gallivanting across Europe as the Father of the Renaissance. Vibrant, cheerful, small of stature, and weak, almost fragile to the touch. North Italy had never been considered a rough-housing nation like his northern neighbours, or a sportsman with a hundred horses and ten thousand men at his disposal like several of his siblings. He had always been a little soft, a little meek, a fiend on the enclosed waters of the Mediterranean and the Dalmatian coast which he’d marauded and conquered and otherwise helped make a mess of for centuries. A stubborn boy with a sunny smile and keen sense of luxury and fashion, almost allergic to hard work unless it was the agony of weighing gold coins in his hand and ruining central European courts with the ridiculous costs of his priceless wares.

The grown nation sitting at the table now was still in many ways that small child: he was cheerful, he was kind: he was openly pleasant and generous with his friendship. But he was also a Republic- and one fraught with difficulty and no small whisper of corruption. He’d fought two World Wars; he’d fought two of the largest wars in World History, and despite his government issues North Italy was still internationally acknowledged as one of the world’s larger and fully developed economies.

With growth and war came age and maturity. Feliciano Vargas was a nation, not a human boy, and not a foolish young man. His generosity was not boundless and his loyalty, like anyone else’s, had limits. The darkness in his eyes and the grim, heavy line of his mouth were both signs of those facts. There were centuries carved down the lines of his shoulders where he was sitting in a loose cotton shirt from decades past, and there was power in the rough cut of his long face, Roman features often obscured by a smile and good cheer but plain now. Almost threatening.

Because it was his house -whatever his political status, a house in Venice was automatically Italy Veneziano’s house- they waited for him to speak first, which after another swallow of wine, he did.

“My wand…”
Arthur and Scotland took a breath, shared a look, and the elder brother answered.

“It was recovered by a member of Hogwarts staff and is being held by the Headmistress until either of you can come to claim it.”

“Marco’s book…” Marco-?

“That abomination the Headmistress showed us in her office.” South Italy said something which must have cleared it up for Scotland, but Arthur still needed a moment before remembering what he’d seen pass between McGonagall and Auror Potter in her office just before Italy’s wand had almost wound up in Ministry hands. “The one she promised me, is it waiting with his wand?”

“It…”

“No-” The awkward and terrible way Arthur had to just sit there and stare at his brother when they both realized they didn’t have the right answer was embarrassing. They weren’t even at the proper meat of the issue yet and Arthur already found himself choking on the explanation. “The Ministry’s Head Auror collected it when I went back to speak with the Headmistress and explain the incident, but we can begin the process of having it turned over the Italian Aurors.”

“Incident.” North Italy repeated, wine hovering in front of his lips as he took a deep breath and drank a good deal more this time. South Italy stood next to his chair and watched the conversation carefully, arms folded. “Centaurs…”

“Feli-”

“Why did you lie to me?” Here it was, and Arthur was grateful for the opportunity to speak sitting down instead of grovelling on his knees. Looking straight at the furious nation at the head of the table, England spoke:

“When you asked me I was thinking of Giant Spiders and flesh-eating beetles. A haunted car and moving trees, Vargas, not-”

“Don’t” Italy’s interruption stalled him, as did the heavy way he set his empty glass down on the table. His brown eyes didn’t seem like they were quite in focus, but he must have been well enough aware. “-use that name.”

“I…” There was at once both more and less in those words than there would have been in human company. But with Italy’s voice rough and hollow in his throat still, Arthur tried to confirm what he’d just heard. “Feliciano-?”

“No.” He spoke softly, not viciously, there was no venom in his voice but the way he slowly swung his head back and forth was enough warning for Arthur to slowly sit back in his chair and understand what had just passed. He wasn’t allowed to use Italy’s human name.

“You’re that angry with me?”

“I am.”

“For an accident!”

“You attacked me-”

“You’ve lost your memory along with that arm: you attacked me!”
North Italy slammed his fist on the table and Arthur stood up before he heard Scotland calling out for him to control himself and he saw South Italy setting a hand on his brother’s shoulder, pouring more wine into his glass to calm him down.

“What are you going on about, what attack, Arthur?” Scotland asked.

“Fight? You two fought? Why?”

“Ask him.” Arthur spat.

“You cursed me.”

“To stop them from attacking because you wouldn’t bloody listen!” Wanting to rip the curse off in front of a herd of angry centaurs-! Of course, Arthur had tried to stop him because not five minutes later he’d been bristling with arrows!

“No, you two had marks on you from fighting centaurs-” Scotland tried to get in the middle of it and Arthur just turned a disgusted look on him. Arthur must have mentioned this to him, he couldn’t remember trying to hide it because there would have been no point in that: it would have come out the exact same way it was now!

“The centaurs came immediately after-”

“Before he killed me.”

Arthur felt himself go stone cold where he stood, staring down the table at the nation whose glowing gold eyes were so self-conceited that Arthur could barely breathe around the anger welling up to choke him. How dare he.

“I stayed with you.” He hissed back.

“What other choice did you have?” Arrogance!

“Enough, you two-” South Italy tried to barge in but Arthur found his voice and barked back with:

“I helped you, I defended you- I’m the reason your damned wand isn’t sitting in Potter’s desk in London!”

“And you’re the reason my arm was left behind with it!”

“An accident!”

“Everything from that school is an accident to you!” The words Arthur didn’t want to hear being flung back at him hit hard enough that he couldn’t cut into Italy’s assault until it was too late: “Take responsibility! Dead children, murdered art, banished ghosts, will-o-wisps, cursed books, centaur attacks and that God-forsaken charm!” North Italy was standing and South just let him go without stepping in. It left Arthur standing there unable to move without appearing to back away, jammed between his chair and the table so he couldn’t size himself up properly against Italy’s rising voice. “Between the two of you there isn’t an ounce of reliable magic on your whole island! You stand in my house and you lecture me, Briton? I’m not the traitor here, you are!”

“Well then I don’t damned well have to be here anymore, do I?” Arthur finally shouted back, indignant. “The inquiry is over and I’ll fight you in whichever arena of the law you take this battle to: Hogwarts will not die as long as I’ve got the strength to defend it!”
The inquiry is not over.

It wasn’t just Arthur who felt the jolt, because South Italy came alive in his brother’s shadow with a jump and he was finally aware of Scotland’s presence again too. All three of them were staring now, because as North Italy slow let himself back down into his chair to sit, he moved with a regal air which Arthur resented and poised himself with his spine straight and shoulders squared.

“You can’t be serious.” But Arthur was still the one who spoke, tongue nailed down in his own mouth and lips cinched tightly around bitter words.

“You added my blood to what has already been spilled at that school.” Italy was as firm as death’s own hand as he made a statement that sounded more like a vow. “You couldn’t raise an army to keep me away from my answers now.”

“And you expect my co-operation?” Arthur didn’t sit down, he was just barely holding onto the pride keeping him firmly rooted to his spot instead of storming out of the house and the city in a rage.

“I expect you to get out of my way.”

The air between them froze with the last breath of that exchange, and Arthur felt his rage crystallize. The chill transformed into the political strength necessary to make sure his spine was straight and his emotions sucked back deep inside. His face sculpted itself into the look of barely concealed disgust that he wanted shining out for the other nation to see. Arthur hadn’t a care for either of their brothers, this whole mess had nothing to do with them anyways.

“Until September first then, Veneziano,” he hissed.

“Get out of my house,” was the only semi-civil reply.

The first Feliciano had to take care of was getting his wand back.

“You’re insane.”

“I thought you said you agreed with me?”

“I do, but you’re still insane.”

Feliciano and Lovino stayed in Venice for another two days so he could rest and make sure his body was actually working properly. The first day he took only fluids, and after the unmentionable discomfort of getting every system working the way it should, he graduated to light soup, a sampling of crackers, and eventually mild fruit and easy vegetables.

Walking came back slowly because his torso was too damaged and he was missing the muscle-mass to breathe properly. But even so, there was a marked difference in how well he was able to breathe on the day he woke up versus the next day, and the day after that.

To be completely honest, he’d lasted only as long as England collecting his suitcase from the one of the guest rooms and leaving the house through the muggle doorway before collapsing. Speaking, standing, and shouting had all been too much for him, nevermind heart rate and unbridled rage. He could have stopped his heart altogether by acting like that… But it had been necessary.

Those two days were nice in some ways because Feliciano and his brother were able to speak to
each other, just sit down and talk for hours and swing slowly and easily between matters of state, magic, and history without interruption or interrogation.

He told Lovino what had happened. He didn’t keep any secrets: he told him about the voices, about the ghost light, about the fingers and the whisper of murder. He told him how he’d broken out of the school and ripped through the mud and filth with his bare hands with the spirit’s help to find the book England had allowed *his* ministry to take as if they had a right to it.

“That’s why you asked me to come.”

“I had to figure it out, Lovino. I had to try.”

“No, I understand.”

And after explaining his side of the fighting and the betrayal, Feliciano was finally told how England had managed to get the cursed charm off of him. There was no spare wand laying in the office between Feliciano’s room and the rest of the house, but plenty of old wandless magic materials. Apparently England still knew a thing about minerals and enchanted crystals, because Feliciano ultimately had to have his bedding changed due to the dredges of *sand* stuck between the sheets from the archaic magic.

After two days of steady recuperation, there was a knock at the house door and a fretful little witch with a blunted nose and quick fingers bowed and bobbed and muttered her way through something that surprised Feliciano more than the cauldron and magic supplies in the office: she fitted them both for robes.

Only a few sets, two or three for each brother which Lovino had the gold already prepped to pay for when, after an hour of standing and stretching, they were done.

“Don’t mind his arm, it’s coming back.”

In Italy, it was not a secret: the name Vargas had a particular meaning, an intrinsic understanding, and unquestionable authority. Feliciano had never flaunted it in the magical community per-say, but Lovino had. When they’d joined each other as one Kingdom and then Republic, what had been common knowledge in the Southern half of the peninsula became common for all. The little witch didn’t question how Feliciano could grow back a severed limb, and he kept the stub of his right arm covered with a neat and tidy binding that left just enough space for the slow, steady burn of rebuilding tissue to extend down. Two thirds of his forearm were back, meaning he was only a few more days away from the real pain and suffering of growing back his wrist and then all the complicated connections and planes of his hand.

Over the ages, Wizard and Muggle attire had drawn inspiration from each other. It was as simple as looking out a window and seeing a style, a cut, an adornment that, while not perfect on its own, inspired a wonderful new creative burst.

But when you wanted to make a statement then it was so much better to stick to tradition, and the military traditions of their magical communities were visually powerful. They both donned simple black tunics with high rounded collars, the panels extending down past their hips and half-way to the knee. These were the same: but the star-burst pins and twist of blue and gold ribbons was different over the hollow of Lovino’s throat from the brass lion with its delicate net of gold chains that Feliciano wore across his chest. A Neapolitan mark for a Venetian one spoke volumes about their power: similar, but not the same. Even the pale blue military sashes they wore diagonally across their bodies were just different enough: the same material and shade of blue, but the silver detailing along Feliciano’s resembled waves like the waters flowing through Venice and along the Dalmatian coast,
whereas Lovino’s gold was ridged and jagged like the mountains towering over so much of his territory.

White gloves and simple white trousers that tucked into high black military boots, gold edging the soles and seams of the polished leather, a magical flourish of the gold running down the outside of their calves for extra decoration. Getting dressed without the aid of his right hand was a challenge, but Lovino was there to mock and help him when a new black and green reversible robe was swung around Feliciano’s shoulders. His brother fixed it in place with an Italian timber wolf’s snarling face, the pendant done in white gold with the green side of the robe glowing against his back. He was able to tug the heavy material down and properly over his shoulder so his right side was completely covered, something which felt wrong because of the way a cloak like this should have draped down his left side to obscure a sword sheathe and keep his fighting arm unobstructed.

Lovino’s cloak had a complimentary red lining, and when he turned to face the mirror they were using and adjust the fall and folds of the fabric, Feliciano was given his first clear view of what was on the back.

“I guess, officially, we didn’t have to give up the crest, did we?” And he touched it, fingertips grazing over the wide, heavily stylized swirl of gold like pools of light melded into the fabric across his brother’s shoulders. Feliciano was wearing the same mark, but didn’t feel like spinning around in a circle trying to get a look at it. It was a V for their family name, the two top parts of the letter bending back on themselves and out behind the letter like mingling streams of water. Lovino had changed the magical crest to this one after their Unification wars, and the delicate strands of red, green and white through the design symbolized that. Green down the left for their friendship, white for the V itself to represent their authority, and red down the right for all the blood North Italy had shed to consolidate his half of the kingdom...

“No we didn’t, now if you’re done talking then pull that hood up over your stupid face.”

Neither of them had a wand, so wandering through Wizarding Venice wasn’t as easy as it should have been. Just getting there was an effort because opening the house’s only door almost put them on an ordinary Venetian street three times. Centuries ago Feliciano had helped his magical community lay a blanketing series of enchantments across the city in exchange for their silence and that they keep their business completely hidden, so with a wand it was a simple thing to tap any doorway in the city and have it swing open to the place where the caster wanted to go.

Feliciano had to use wandless magic to get the doors to work instead, which meant he felt dizzy and had to rest for a moment taking slow, steady breaths while Lovino held the front door open with his foot, a dark and dingy corridor reaching out in front of them instead of a twisted little road through the city’s heart.

“Are you even going to make it all the way to that stupid school?” Was the blunt dismissal from Lovino once Feliciano got himself back under control and they stepped into the dank corridor together.

“If I don’t, will you carry me?” They set a fast pace through the half-light of the city’s underbelly until they reached a glowing stretch of canal water, leaving the stones behind in favour of silent, enchanted travel over fast moving water. The canal system in Wizarding Venice was confusing even for him, so when they unexpectedly passed another hooded figure moving casually across the waters, Feliciano drew a silver coin from the purse at his side and offered it.

“Which way to the ministry office?” There was no point trying to use Standard Italian down here. He was Venezia and his own local dialect came easily off his lips as the money changed hands and the juvenile wizard drew his wand to conjure up a little ball of silver thread. As soon as the string cut
itself off from the wand, it was placed in Feliciano’s palm with a simple farewell and the boy continued on his way.

“Your people never do anything without a charge,” Lovino complained once the wizard was gone, and Feliciano just laughed softly as he tossed the string down a bend in the passage and watched it drop onto the water where it bounced. Like a German fairy tale Ludwig had once told him, the ball kept rolling and took on a life its own, leaving a trail of silver light which Feliciano wound back up around his gloved fingers like a spool as they hurried after it. Up staircases, through quiet public gardens several feet wide and housing snoozing elders and young witches absorbed in their books, Feliciano had twice the thread he’d thrown around his fingers by the time they climbed one more flight of shadowed steps and found a gondola waiting for them in the tunnel. Slipping the tangled thread into his pocket with a bit of fuss, the brothers stepped onto the boat and let it pull away from the stones to carry them to their destination.

He couldn’t say where they were in the city exactly, just that there was a pale blue light building in the tunnel as they drifted along for several minutes until a shiver of cold magic went down their backs. When the distant roar of water began building up, they started to pick up speed and he noticed his brother getting a little tense and fidgeting where he was standing behind him.

“You might want to sit down.”

“I know what’s coming, asshole, I’ve been here before.”

“Yes, but-” Too late!

The gondola lurched forward like a roller coaster car catching the winch to pull it up, the vessel picking up speed and nearly shooting out from under them. Feliciano’s left hand grabbed the prow of the black boat, the gondola spraying water from its nose like it had a motor attached to it, going even faster until the wind coming at them was strong enough to lift Feliciano’s cloak back and blow the hood off his head. The blue light grew brighter and began bearing down on them, the roar of falling, crashing water rising higher and higher until they hit the mouth of the tunnel. They felt the spray of the canal water reaching into the air and the liquid highway dropped beneath them into a basin several hundred feet down and just as far across, but the gondola slowed down and kept going.

Kept going straight, that is, sailing lazily through the air and causing an adrenaline-fuelled laugh to kick out of Feliciano’s mouth as he took his first look around in years.

They were somewhere, maybe, just off the coast of the Lido resting on the shelf of the lagoon before the open mouth of the Adriatic Sea. Venice’s ministry of magic was housed under an incredible glass dome thrice as wide as Grandpa Rome’s colloseum and ridged with gold and bronze, several panels of the dome missing after centuries of standing and allowing the sea water to fall in massive, roaring cascades down into the blackness that felt miles below them.

The ministry and most of Wizarding Venice’s liveable quarters were built of white plaster stones as a mimicry and reflection of the muggle buildings on the shore. What had once been a sunken palace was a domed structure surrounded and propped up by crooked white pillars, all of it resting on a shelf of stone which extended out into the middle of the dome from the proper lagoon shelf. Sunlight was streaming down through the water and glass over their heads, other boats launching and docking from the wharfs hovering in the rising mists of the falls.

“I hate your city.”

“One day you’ll like Venice.”
Laughing at Lovino made finding the courage to jump from the boat to the crumbling white dock a little easier when they arrived, because it really was something of a leap from the teetering gondola to the surprisingly safe and study platform. With a whistle Lovino tossed him the braided blue cord resting in the bottom of the gondola, and after looping it quickly around a spiralled pole just like the ones found in the muggle city, they both laughed a little about the stupidity of having the brother with one hand pull the vessel in to dock properly.

“Your roof is leaking by the way.” The two of them firmly standing on solid ground meant they got to start walking again, Feliciano pulling his green hood up again to match the red one obscuring Lovino’s face. A plaster guard rose along the side of the wharf as they moved quickly and with safety, a wide and sweeping staircase leading them up to a terrace with blue and white checkered tiles, many of which were cracked and worn by centuries of feet. A massive alabaster lion’s face in the middle of a dark blue circle, surrounded by shimmering brass sunbeams, made Feliciano smile and remember a time when his Republic had been at its height and all of this had been new.

“I think the falls are charming.” Looking back over his shoulder at the horizontal cascades, the sound of them was deafening and defied logic, but that was what magic was for: being illogical. “They add character.”

“Is that what we’re calling it now?”

Another set of terraced steps and eventually they took a staircase that was much narrower and followed the outside curve of the hill and the rising palace in front of them. Arches of stone that sported draping spring vines bloomed briefly with petals blue and yellow as they passed under them, little whispers and drops of fairy light threatening to dust over their shoulders until they picked up the pace again- Feliciano regretting that choice when he was struck with a sharp pain in his right side by the time they reached the next platform.

“Are you sure you’re alright doing this today?” Having Lovino stop and turn around with a dismissive look but concerned words was not a good thing. “You’re on a God-damned suspension, it’s not like anyone’s taking attendance.”

“Yes, I’m alright, and yes, today.” They had too much work ahead of them for Feliciano to take much more time on his back not doing anything. He hated being rushed and pushed around, so for once it was better to look at how much time he had and get as much of it done before the deadlines loomed! He could slack off with his test scores and finals, not this. “Look, see? I’m already better!” A bit of a lie, but he grinned through the heat leaking into his chest from tender ribs, left hand reaching around to adjust the weight of his cloak over his shoulder so his sleeve and wrist were hidden again.

Lovino didn’t buy it, but at least he didn’t say anything else as Feliciano caught up to him and they took off in-step with each other towards the large doors looming ahead of them. They’d climbed most of the building with the last flight of stairs, at least half-way up it now with a staggering sunlit view of the glass dome protecting his city’s magical heart from the water. The edge of the dome where they’d shot out of the canal system was visible as a dark band along the thick rim of the superstructure’s perimeter, magic thumbing its nose in the face of physics because even as Venezia, Feliciano wasn’t exactly sure which way North was. Geography said that while he was standing on the building now, it meant Venice was behind him and the water he was staring out at was the Adriatic, but the canals through Venice had meant they’d shot straight at the palace.

His people loved to put on a show and give visitors the grandest first impression possible. What more needed to be said?
Hooded and in sync as they walked, the platform they crossed now was hedged with potted shrubs and the cracked stones were freshly swept. A midnight blue set of square stone doors with brass knobs two hand-spans long didn’t need them to grab or wrestle them open: Feliciano felt the charge of magic through the heel of his boot as they stepped forward and the doors gave a loud crack before swinging open with a loud groan.

Swinging from private into full public view, the perfect way they’d stepped off with each other fell away into something Feliciano needed a moment to recognize, but then happily enjoyed.

Lovino inched ahead of him by a toe’s worth because his stride suddenly lengthened, arms in full swing and gloved hands in tight fists as he led with his shoulders and attention focused straight ahead. Feliciano couldn’t see his face through the side of his hood, but his own gaze jumped off his brother’s head and to the circular chamber they entered.

Within the climate-controlled heart of the city there was no worry about insulation or glass: sunlight swept unhindered into the sky-blue dome that opened over their heads under a forest of white and blue-veined marble pillars, everything capped with polished brass that shone like gold. He avoided looking straight up at an old and outdated map of the Venetian Republic, and swept his attention down through the panels of light to find the several dozen semi-circular wooden desks set up between the pillars, the chamber misleading in size and obviously much bigger on the inside than it had seemed from beyond the doors.

They were plunged into the flutter and drone of office work in full swing, keyboard taps and telephone trills absent in favour of clicking abacus beads and the dry rasp of unfurling paper.

“Venetian.” His brother said simply, stopping in the middle of the open floor over the face of yet another white lion, this one with wings spread in the background instead of a starburst, and Feliciano swept forward with eyes bouncing easily off plaques and signs hovering in mid-air with different departments laid out like any other government office in any other part of the world. Finding the one he wanted with the image of a winged key resting on the aged bronze plaque, he swept forward to fulfill the unspoken command and was met half-way by a young wizard in a sky-blue robe that matched all the other wizards and witches behind their desks.

The garment was detailed and embroidered so heavily with gold thread that it was more brasssy than blue, a stiff coat that fell from his chin to his knees. His black hair was combed back and tied in a long tail down his neck, but Feliciano didn’t take any more time to admire the wizard’s clear eyes or olive features.

“A port-key to Rome.” He requested easily, and with a fat gold coin this time the young worker would have to excuse for being stamped with British designs, the weight of the gold was more important. “Or London, if you have one.”

The wizard’s narrow face soured briefly at the second request, but the gold had already vanished into his hand.

“Rome can be arranged.”

With a simple thank you Feliciano nodded his head and the wizard did the same, turning around and sweeping back over to his desk while Feliciano spun on his toe with a smile for his sour-faced brother.

“He said-”

“I heard what he said.” Lovino snapped back, pivoting over the Lion’s face before taking two steps
back so he was standing on one of the white wings instead. The low, steady grind of stones moving
over each other under the floor was to blame for the shift in position, and as Feliciano moved to stand
across from his brother on the opposite side of the lion, he looked down and watched the creature’s
stone mouth slowly slide open.

A great black pit under the white stone was filled up quickly by the oily reflection of gears spinning
and whirring fluidly in the shadows, hundreds of pistons and cogs ticking and springing before a
louder clacking sound rose over the mesh, and from the dark depths a glint of gold began to rise in
the form of a white pillar with a gold platter resting on top, a brass cross standing in the centre of it
like something pilfered from a church. Lovino scoffed at it once the pillar stopped rising and a series
of steps unfolded out from its white base to form a bridge of them to step over the machinery below.

“Better a cross than a shield, brother.” Feliciano said.

“Barely. Come on, we’ll have to get another one in Rome.” From Venice to Rome, then Rome to
London, and finally London to Hogwarts. And then they’d have to come all the way back at least as
far as their capital in a day. The reality made stepping onto the bridge that much harder because it
finally made that bed back in his house seem more inviting than a trip to cold dreary desperate
Scotland.

“Mister Vargas, wait!” Almost missing the bridge and plummeting into the clockwork didn’t help
him either!

Lovino was already standing at the Port-key when Feliciano turned around and saw the same
magical clerk standing behind him, a shocked expression on the young man’s face and the same gold
coin Feliciano had paid him with dangling between his fingers. Ah, he must have seen the crest on
his back when Feliciano’d turned around…

“British gold is still gold.” The nation uttered kindly.

“Forgive me, sir, but I cannot accept payment from you.”

“Then hold it for the next person in need.”

“Sir.”

“I command you.”

That ended the exchange, which meant Feliciano was free to smile openly in front of the shocked
and more than a little distressed face of the clerk. He joined his brother up next to the port-key and
offered his left hand to his brother which Lovino took without comment, his other arm remaining
down because there was no point showing off the injury with an audience of oddly quiet wizards.

“How long have you been waiting to say that to one of your own, you bastard?”

“Oh, about four years.”

And with a rough guffaw and Lovino’s fingers reaching for the brass edges of the relic, there was
nothing at all to say about the sudden shift and crack of being in Venice, and then being somewhere
else completely.

Port-keys were instant travel across incredible distances, and they only worked two ways: A and B.
They took up almost no energy from the user, and for the most part they were very difficult to
damage or destroy. One key in a structured environment or system could conceivably keep working
for centuries until the item itself fell to pieces.
“You look like you’re going to be sick.” Feliciano had to stop rubbing his right arm under the cloak and Lovino was there to task him about it while they stood under the massive, three-tiered gold fountain in the main hall of the British Ministry of Magic. They both kept their hoods up, and because this was important enough to get him out of bed Feliciano resisted sitting down on the basin of the fountain. He did feel dizzy, but just closing his eyes and listening to the water crash and trickle behind him was helping a little bit.

“You really are no port-keys to Hogwarts?” A half-hour journey by Floo Powder was probably going to end with Feliciano losing his light breakfast all down the front of his tunic and medals…

“Relax, I figured something stupid like this would happen.”

“Really?” Feliciano went away for a few years and then came back to find his brother becoming a whole different person without him! It was sort of disappointing to think about. How exactly were they going to get along when Feliciano came back properly after all this running around with Magic?

They were only left standing there for a few more minutes, Feliciano struggling to stay upright and Lovino pacing mercilessly back and forth over the green and black tiles, before the precaution Lovino had taken finally got their attention.

“Mister Vargas!” The voice boomed, and Feliciano jumped.

“Signore Gamp, I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten my request.”

If Eliza Gamp was a tall and rather round girl with a sad frown and long black hair, then the only thing she really shared with her father was their hair, which was also so much thicker on top of being longer. Mister Gamp wasn’t wearing black today, but a pinstripe green suit with a long indigo robe swirling around him as he marched across the ministry floor to them. He looked as stern as Feliciano remembered him on every train platform to and from the school, but was shocked at how short the impossible wall of a man really was: Feliciano was taller!

“When I give my word I don’t break it.” But he was still sharp and spoke straight and fast, his square jaw filled in with the black edges of his beard where it was sculpted to a point under his chin. He still looked like a gruff, harsh sort of person, but the way he spoke so briskly to Lovino… “Is the boy not with you then? Hogwarts won’t like that.”

“The boy is at home recovering from his stupidity.” And then the way Lovino answered just as harshly… “And frankly I don’t give a damn what Hogwarts does and does not like. Expel him if they want to, but my idiot brother needs his wand back.” Oh no… they were friends.

“It’s Hogwarts protocol to snap the wands of students who end up expelled…” A sudden shot of fear down Feliciano’s spine woke him up properly, banishing some of that sleepy nausea and making him step up properly next to his brother while Lovino answered the statement in a low, menacing voice:

“If you think I will hesitate to snap the neck of any wizard who attempts it, Oseric…”

“And that’s the reason I keep telling you to be careful.” Feliciano was about to break in and try to get himself a place in the conversation, or at least a proper introduction, but the warning Mister Gamp breathed through his teeth like he’d said it several times before made him pause. “We lost our pride after the war, no one respects the old families anymore, and acting like you’re anything more than the
common banker or hat-maker will see you gossiped about dark magic and investigated in short order…” There was a brief pause in his words, and then the first half-smile Feliciano had ever seen from Ellie’s father crossed his thick lips. “They say uttering Lucius Malfoy’s name three times in a dark room is all but guaranteed to bring the Aurors running.” Feliciano didn’t like the sound of that at all…

“Now, where are my manners?” The wizard gave a smile that was more like he just bared his teeth with his eyes a little wider than normal. “Oseric Gamp, Hogwarts Trustee and Transportation Overseer.” And a hand was finally offered in Feliciano’s direction.

“Signore Gamp, this is my cousin Fabrizio Vargas of the Venetian House.” The handshake was as rigid and firm as the man himself, but it was nice to be treated like an adult again and when the brisk shake and introduction were over, Feliciano nodded simply without saying anything. Small-talk could come when his head wasn’t spinning. Mister Gamp didn’t seem to notice and just nodded briskly, he probably thought Feliciano couldn’t speak English.

“This way, gentlemen.”

They walked quickly and passed through a glass door into the inner workings of the ministry, and along the way Eliza’s father explained that while public access to the school was difficult at best, obviously exceptions could be made for family members, especially those coming from across the continent.

“Floo powder is messy and the train takes a great deal of work to prepare for the journey.” Flying was dangerous if you didn’t know where you were going, Feliciano did not want to Apparate. “This is much simpler.” A small gold key let them into a corridor with only one door at the end of it, their boots cracking against the stone floor and echoing off the narrow stone walls before Mister Gamp drew a rune on the door in front of them with his wand. With a low grinding noise it rose straight up in the air instead of swinging either way, and inside was a chamber with a pedestal much like the one from Venice.

The chamber was circular and edged in dark brown wood, and as they walked the walls glittered with the light of thousands of tiny swinging coins, each one hanging from brightly coloured cords. On the pedestal as they approached it were three thick gold coins, each resting on a little cloth purse with silver and green cords and little paper tags reading Hogwarts in flowing black script.

“These will take you straight to the edge of the apparition barrier, and I believe Professor Draco Malfoy will be waiting for you when you arrive.” Obviously the pouches, like the cords, were meant to make handling easier because Mister Gamp plucked two of the port-keys up and held one in each hand, offering them carefully to each of them. “It’s good manners to cross back out through the gates before using them to leave, and I highly suggest you do so. They’ll bring you back out to the fountain when you come back, and you can simply pass them along to any of the attendants you see.”

“Thank you for making this exception for us, Signore Gamp.” Lovino said, Feliciano taking a moment to test the weight dangling from his finger so he could swing the coin up into his palm without seeming too strange.

“Just don’t make a habit of it, Mister Vargas.”

And, once again, they were off.
Arriving at Hogwarts was nothing much after all the fuss of getting there. Feliciano was careful about the cloak wrapped around his shoulders and, although he found himself chewing on his tongue, he let Lovino handle their welcome at the gate when Professor Malfoy came striding purposefully towards them through the May sunlight. It was somewhere in the early afternoon as they were brought into the castle after Feliciano was briefly introduced as “My cousin Fabrizio” to Professor Malfoy, and with a bit of a bow to avoid having to dance around not being able to shake hands, the Professor swept them up into the castle.

The stone halls were empty but the castle itself was still humming. Classes were in session, and Feliciano tried vaguely to remember what day of the week it was and where he otherwise would have been if not for England’s colossal screw-up. This was all completely England’s fault, and Feliciano hadn’t figured out what he was going to do with his own teeth between now and next September.

It was a Friday, so the Slytherin Third years were probably in Professor Parkinson’s Transfiguration class. Feliciano wasn’t completely sure if he was supposed to be following Professor Malfoy to the Headmistress’s office with his brother, or quietly worrying about all the school work he was missing and would have to make up for later.

The password Professor Malfoy gave to the large, lumbering stone gargoyle seated outside the Headmistress’s staircase was ‘oleander’, a potions ingredient Feliciano could remember Scorpius discussing once before they were up the stairs and being introduced:

"Headmistress, Lovino and Fabrizio Vargas have arrived to speak with you."

"Of course." No one could ever doubt that Minerva McGonagall was a woman of many graces and refinements, but everything her school was concocting right under her nose was what stopped Feliciano from crossing the circular chamber and laying a respectful kiss on the old Sorceress’ hand. He understood England and Scotland’s respect for her, but as he bowed his head slightly and Lovino followed with a stiffer, shorter bob of the head, the two Italians were taken in with an almost severe look, something the old, poorly ageing witch tried very hard to hide with soft words and a gentle turn of the hand towards a pair of seats set up across from her desk. "Gentlemen please have a seat, there is much to discuss. Thank you, Professor Malfoy."

A pause…

"Headmistress, if I might-"

"That will be all, Professor."

Maybe Feliciano wanted to hear what the Professor had to say, but when the Headmistress dropped her chin and gave an unmistakable look over the rim of her glasses at the Healer hovering behind the two standing nations, she automatically won and Professor Malfoy vanished back down the stairs and into the school without another word.

As soon as they heard the distant rumble and grind of the Gargoyle settling back into place, Feliciano was surprised and almost laughed when the same stubborn stare swept over the two of them to land directly on him instead.

"Headmis-"
"Where do I begin, Mister Vargas?" She laughed, sarcasm at its worst until her whole face darkened. "Illegal magic-" her voice was like a wire, cutting and precise: "-trespassing off school grounds, black magic books, centaur attacks, apparitions left and right! All of Hogsmeade out looking for you well near to dawn, the splinching of a limb, Mister Vargas! I trust you had personal objections to that but explaining away and covering up for your idiocy has cost this school."

"Is that a plural ‘your’?"

"Yes, it is!"

Good, but Feliciano kept flinching under his hood at the repeated whip-crack of her voice. At least he was still standing: left hand slowly coming down to rest on the back of the chair he’d been offered. He was very happy to keep it between him and her desk!

"As far as I am concerned," she continued, flushed and nearly breathless, “both you and Mister Kirkland are equally to blame for this entire episode. Furthermore: how dare you presume to use your own ridiculous circumstances to test and defile this entire school!” What? "Shame on you!” No!

"Headmistress, you misunderstand me completely!"

“Oh, I do? Please, I beg of you to enlighten me!” This woman was terrifying!

“Hogwarts is not responsible for my brother’s injuries.” Lovino finally stepping in was a relief, Feliciano standing there shaking more than he wanted to say with the angry little witch towering behind her desk, dark eyes refusing to blink. Had she bewitched him? No, he’d just checked most of his nerve at the door… “Scotland and I have already discussed it and I don’t personally care what his little brother had to say: Kirkland should have known better, and the way he handled it was pathetic.” Harsh words that Felicianno… didn’t really want to deny. “It was unprofessional and it’s complicated everything on all sides, but for all the things that are completely wrong with this place, I sincerely doubt that a pair of actual thirteen-year-old boys could have outrun and avoided your entire staff for that long, nevermind trespassed from the school in the first place.”

The quiet that followed Lovino’s close was… surprising. Feliciano was spared Headmistress McGonagall’s chilling stare in favour of her looking at his brother, and there was a noticeable ruffle down the red and orange panels of her robes as she stood there behind her desk and regarded him. She didn’t seem ready to rip into him, and Feliciano watched them closely around the edge of his hood.

“I’m not accustomed to hearing even that ounce of faith come from people like you, Mister Vargas.” Oh now that wasn’t fair: why did she get to call him Mister Vargas and make it sound so nice. “But I’ll only thank you for it if you’ll explain that previous point: all the things which you perceive as wrong. What would those be, exactly?”

“Most of them trivial.” Lovino was the one to step out from behind his chair first like he was going to sit down, and in an effort not to look like he was following him, Feliciano moved just fast enough to look like they started and then ended the motion together while his brother kept talking.

But then he cursed himself as soon as he committed to sitting down only for Lovino to remain up. He felt stupid sitting down while his older brother stood there in front of his seat, he wasn’t used to being the passive one.

“Things about bullies and teachers that aren’t worth dragging out here.” He didn’t think he liked having South Italy steal his thunder… “But murder, Headmistress. That I have a problem with.” And then he sat down, a perfectly executed gesture to say ‘Let’s talk’ instead of ‘I’ve got you now’. He
could have been proud but instead North Italy felt… wary.

“I’ve heard that hideous accusation before.” McGonagall also took her seat, accepting the offer of simple discussion instead of thundering tempers. He was still positive Lovino had a louder bark than she did, but it was better not to go that way. “Unless you have more than just a feeling and suspicion, sirs, I grow tired of dealing with it.”

Part way through her response Feliciano received an olive-branch from his brother for that brief miscommunication. It was literally just a flash of eye-contact between them before focusing on her again, but it gave North Italy full reign of the topic.

“I did not leave the school as a student, Headmistress. I’ve only broken school enchantments once before now: so I could examine the damaged paintings last year on my own. I did that for the sake of this investigation.”

“And you were not punished for that trespass.” He’d also helped a Slytherin seventh year avoid expulsion at the last moment, but McGonagall outright forgiving him for it had never- “But as I recall it you were not caught and no one was inconvenienced or grievously injured either.”

“Both of which were Kirkland’s fault, after I’d already decided to go.”

“Then why did you do it?”

So he explained it again, and to be honest Feliciano was tired of describing it by now. He didn’t like revisiting bad memories if he didn’t have a way of dealing with them, be they memories of people lost over time or souls calling questions to him he couldn’t answer. But McGonagall’s questions he could manage, and it helped that she didn’t ask very many before moving straight to the heart of the next topic:

“Had I denied Mister Potter the book, I would have had to explain more than I cared to at that moment.” She explained herself bluntly and judging by the sound Lovino made next to him, it was satisfying. “Fights between the British and Italian ministries are not something a school Headmistress is qualified to handle. However, I do still possess some outside authority.”

The sound of a drawer sliding open addressed a pin-prick of anxiety that Feliciano had been ignoring since arriving at the school, and he shuffled forward in his seat when a thin, narrow wooden box was placed on top of the desk by the headmistress, her wrinkled fingers nimble over the brass latch and aged wood so she could open the lid before turning the whole thing around. Feliciano was welcomed to stand, and he was relieved by the reunion shining up at him from the case.

His wand was long, almost twelve inches, and carved from the age-darkened flesh of an almond tree. He hadn’t made it himself, but he had specified all the components- Nations sort of had to. The rod was almost perfectly straight with a pronounced rim just above the thicker end to help form the handle. The very end of it, something he hadn’t let his friends really get a proper look at, had a burnt look that was now nestled in the dark blue velvet of the box’ interior. If they couldn’t see the shadows and dips that, in the proper light, bore and eerie resemblance to a human skull…

“I trust you will be more careful with it in the future.” There was no sting in the Headmistress’ voice this time, and that was what helped Feliciano gingerly pry his wand free from the box with his left hand, taking the grip up smoothly in his gloved palm and squeezing tightly until he felt a simple, comforting warmth bleed through his skin and knew that the rod had forgiven him for leaving it behind. “And… that you will be returning to round off an eventful third year here at Hogwarts.”

“Will that be necessary?” Lovino asked the question while Feliciano slipped his wand into a narrow
set of loops stitched to the inside of the strap across his chest.

“Unless your brother wishes to fail the year entirely, he will have to make an appearance for his final exams.” He was brought back into things by the way she turned her face and attention back on him, “Yours and Mister Kirkland’s official suspensions may be lifted at any time, when are we to expect you?”

Feliciano hesitated.

“A- hah, a few more days.”

“At least.” When Feliciano hesitated again, the two of them shared another look before Lovino just rudely nodded his head at McGonagall. “Go ahead and show her. I want to make some adjustments to that idiot charm of yours anyways, but if you think you’ll be able to explain everything away on my being an asshole who won’t heal you properly then good luck.”

“I don’t quite follow…” Healing properly was, well, it was easy to explain to muggles most of the time when they needed to know, but making sense of it to Wizards who had their own brand of incredible healing was complicated. Muggles were baffled but willing to accept that Nations could heal from almost anything, Wizards were forever hung up on why their way had to be so painful…

“If Professor Malfoy could help then I would certainly ask him, but it’s just better not to mix magics.” She knew what had happened to his arm, she’d already shrieked at him about it so Feliciano didn’t have to be so shy. Finally moving his right arm underneath the cloak, he simply pulled the green and black fabric away until the bound-up knot of his sleeve was visible around the unfortunate end of his arm. It was still burning, a steady hum of pain that he was used to and could safely tuck into the back of his conscious thoughts. McGonagall didn’t react badly per-say but she made an ugly face of revulsion and Feliciano tucked the limb back out of sight.

“At the rate he’s been going his wrist and most of his fingers should be back sometime in the next week or so.” Lovino explained, sounding enough like a parent for Feliciano to side-eye him a little bit without getting in the way. “If he stays in Venice and takes it easy then it could be as little as a few days, but if we slap that charm on him for one and then bring him back here to Scotland, then it might take as long as June.”

“Oh, don’t say terrible things like that!” Feliciano cut in, more to stop himself from imagining the possibility. “It’s the pain I’m worried about, I mean, I’m okay with it but it still hurts. I don’t want to worry my- worry the rest of the students.”

“And you call it ‘mixing magics’ to deal with the issue in a more humane manner?” She meant having a medi-wizard like Malfoy treat him, but there was no need for subtle eye-contact this time: both halves of Italy shook their heads.

“It almost never works, and usually just creates and even bigger mess.” And there really was no way of telling just how badly things would go. Feliciano had seen limbs sprout the wrong way trying to heal injuries like his, or come away just fine and better than before. Little cuts that opened up into maiming slashes just trying to form a patch over them, nevermind that disastrous time Greece had tried using magic to get rid of an economic cold and nearly put himself under. Mixing magics was just a bad idea.

“Next week should be enough time. Meanwhile, I think we’ve taken up enough of yours for one day.” Because judging by the clock on the wall next to her desk, they’d overstayed their welcome.

“Your belongings will be returned to the dormitory and the staff informed of the decision then.
Mister Vargas, you have my permission to return home with your guardian until the twentieth of May, when you will return for your exams.”

“Excuse me?” Just- it was that middle part that made him stop where they’d both just stood up to leave.

“My permission, Mister Vargas.” But McGonagall was still in no mood to humour him, fingers twined together and hands pressed on her desk where she was leaning forward now so he could hear her clearly. “You are still a student of this school, therefore you require Hogwarts’ permission to leave in the middle of term- unless you would rather be caught trespassing a second time?” He definitely did not…

“Er, grazie, Headmistress.”

“Good afternoon, Mister Vargas.”

And so with all of that taken care of, they left and made the long, magical journey home…

…Feliciano didn’t complain about taking it easy as promised when they got there either. He practically fell into bed with his robe and boots still on, face-down in the pillow with Lovino harping at him and calling him names while trying to get the cumbersome outfit off for him. It was nice to be looked after, and despite sleeping well into the evening and only eating about half the pasta his brother had ready for him, some of the weight in his lungs was gone when he woke up: breathing was a little easier now.

“Put that on,” was the command the next morning when Feliciano drowsily found his brother standing in the living room of the venetian apartment, fingers spread wide and domed over a familiar silver cross resting in the middle of the dining room table. He didn’t look up from where strands of red light were tangled around his fingertips and feeding down into the charm. When Feliciano stood there staring at the blatant magic going on in his house he was barked at to quit gawking and do as Lovino fucking said.

‘That’ was one of the robes from yesterday where it had been flung over the back of one of Feliciano’s couches. It was long and a soft Persian blue, lined with silver thread along the hem and actually very form-fitting through the shoulders and arms. It stopped tight at the wrists like a 19th century military jacket, and when Feliciano looked properly at the white detailing along the hood, he was pleased to see the pattern of a lion’s open mouth and studded silver eyes.

Under the robe was a set of dress slacks? A simple black dress shirt and then something even more curious than the blue tie: a fully modern and deceptively familiar utility belt, complete with a handgun, electro-shock weapon, two spare magazines for the gun, and what looked like a collapsible night-stick. He had to actually unholster the gun and see the wear along the grip before he understood what he was looking at.

“These are from my uniform!” His muggle uniform, his officer’s command outfit that Feliciano hadn’t touched since last summer when he’d gone very quickly with Lovino for a tour of one of their naval bases in Sicily’s territory. He’d done himself up quickly in combat fatigues for mandatory drills and a few days of specialized, nation-led training, and then hurried off with Germany, Japan, and his brother to see those wineries.

“Of course they are, now get dressed, asshole.”

“But why-?” A wizard’s robe with a muggle weapon’s belt? That didn’t make any-
“I didn’t ask for your commentary I just told you to put it on so stop complaining!” He wasn’t complai- “Now!” Okay! Okay, fine!

There were even socks and boots to go with the ensemble, and once Feliciano managed to get himself into the full outfit, he was guided over to a complicated looking rune of salt Lovino had poured all over his floor.

“I’m sick of all this complaining about you having to get fucking naked before you can take the charm off.” Lovino finally explained, crouching over the design so he could mend the salt lines where Feliciano’s heel scuffed one. “It just proves Scotland’s an idiot. Yes the charm makes sense and yes it works if that’s what you want to call it, but there’s no reason why it can’t hold a transfiguration and storage function too.”

“W… what?”

“I’m going to seal what you’re wearing into the fucking charm! Now you take it off you have fucking clothes on! How hard is this to understand!!?” Oh!

“You know, I think I prefer it when you scream at me in person instead of through a howler.”

“Shut up!”

For Feliciano it was a simple as letting Lovino slip the charm over his head and rest where it always would around his neck. It was still terrible to put on, still dizzying and nauseating, and truth be told he nearly threw up the second time after Lovino made a grumbling change and then gave it to him to try again. The third time his eyes were full of fatigued tears, but he also found himself shaking and crumpled on the apartment floor with his naked body shrunken down and immature with the disguise strangling him again. When Lovino took it off him for the last time, he was still on his hands and knees, still trembling with his eyes and nose weeping, hands grasping at the floor where the salt had vanished. Lovino was there to help him when he did throw up a little bit, but he was also wearing the robe and gun belt and shirt and slacks again, even his tie was knotted exactly the same way.

The white crystals on the cross had turned to brilliant green peridots, but otherwise it looked and felt exactly the same where Lovino abandoned it on the wooden boards so he could wrap Feliciano’s arm around his shoulders and hoist him up.

His brother kept talking to him in gentler tones as he was half-walked, half-carried back to bed to sleep away the nausea and wake up to a bowl of hot polenta. He spent the day reading and catching up with current events in Venice and across Italy, and even managed a conference call with his brother and Austria for about an hour. That conversation ended when the tell-tale cry in the back of his mind turned itself into a hurting scream, and he crawled weakly back into bed to hug his healing arm close where his wrist’s joint was finally forming and hurting so much more than he wanted it to.

Whatever he wore when putting on the cross would be what returned to him when he took it off: what Lovino called a simple replacement charm which manifested as the minor change in colour. ‘Green suits your stupid school house anyways’ was just a minor benefit on top of a change Feliciano had no honest feelings about. That same evening he put the charm on one more time, wearing only the loose tee-shirt and red shorts he’d slept in, and then dressed himself in a spare set of Hogwarts robes and Slytherin green before making sure it worked in reverse. As soon as he put the charm on again as an adult he became a thirteen-year-old boy wearing school robes. When he took the charm off: he was a grown man in his underwear with a splitting headache and twisting stomach.

Had he been mortal, the white heat in his hand would have had him screaming. Nations had to be a little tougher than that, a little more durable even if it wasn’t how they necessarily wanted to live.
Healing burned and it was like fire, but he wasn’t physically about to burst into flames. As long as he kept the area covered Feliciano was able to manage the muggle grocery shopping the next day although Lovino was still the one cooking for them between two conference calls to Rome and several exhausting rounds of e-mails. There was a muggle printer and scanner tucked away in that magical office, plus enough modern wiring in the apartment that everything could be hooked up just fine. When his brother wasn’t on the phone managing their affairs, he was hounding Feliciano to go back to sleep and fucking eat something because he looked nauseous.

Magic was still taxing, and all of his school books and supplies were still tucked away at Hogwarts. It was much, much easier for Feliciano to just dress himself in a muggle spring jacket and jeans and leave to walk around Venice in the sunshine with his bad hand bandaged up. It did him a lot of good to spend a few hours getting lost over the canals and spend a couple Euros on coffee and conversation with his people. He very nearly wound up on a train to Milan by ‘accident’ before remembering that he would be expected back at the apartment before night fell. The rewards for mingling and reconnecting were generous: he forgot the pain completely while focusing on a football at his feet. He fished it out of one of the canals near a gated alley that the ball had come screaming out of from a child’s haywire kick. By the time he finished walking an elderly couple home after helping carry a surprisingly large bag of groceries to their house for them, the first joint and extension of his thumb were back and mobile.

By the end of that weekend the brothers were back in Rome and they were greeted by an unfamiliar owl with grey and black speckled plumes perched nervously outside their town-house’s narrow balcony door. It handed over a wrinkled parcel of letters wrapped in brown paper in exchange for a bread crust and half a rejected tomato, and flew away with a beat of its tired old wings.

“This one’s for you?” There were more names than he expected inside the parcel: Ellie, Charlie, Gloria, David, Addison, Manpreet, Finn and Ian, even a very short one that didn’t have a proper name, just the initials “H.W.” and a reference to ‘my sister Rose’ which meant it was Hugo Weasley from the football club. Scorpius’ letter was the surprise, because that was the one Feliciano showed and then handed over to his brother.

“Little bastard probably thinks I’m beating you.”

“Don’t be like that…” But that was also the last Feliciano saw of the letter, watching his brother slowly rip open the envelope and walk away with Scorpius’ looping black writing splotched across the parchment. Whatever words his young friend had sent, his brother didn’t feel like sharing them.

Reading the letters almost broke his heart, but going back to work for the first time in months meant he didn’t have the time to answer them before a brief, sour e-mail from London curdled his mood:

‘Scotland will be handling your request for the book’s transfer, I will be making my return to Hogwarts this afternoon.’

- The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.’

It just bred arrogance for him to sign like that, nevermind the fact that Feliciano knew Romano and Scotland had their hands full getting ready for a combined UN meeting coming up at the end of May. Feliciano didn’t answer the e-mail or the stack of letters, he just closed the program and gathered up his papers for a carbon emissions report Lovino had given to him to finish off for France and Germany. He spent that week on the phone in his dusty office and put everything magical from his mind completely.

Which was hard to do, especially considering he didn’t know what England was saying to everyone in that awful school. It spoiled what could have been a good opportunity to sit and talk to
Switzerland about tourism initiatives and road maintenance on a stretch of highway across their mutual border, but as soon as Feliciano’s stiff, mostly-formed fingers could hold and scratch out letters with a pen again, he left the comforts of his normal life behind again for enchanted chains and port-keys.

Lovino was in New York for that United Nations conference, so the final bitter straw of the entire ordeal was Feliciano donning the modified charm in Rome, and following Sicily through their Magical Ministry all the way to London, and from London, taking almost an hour by Floo Powder to reach the school.

“This is such a waste of a day!”

“If San Marino would have agreed to it, I would have gladly asked him instead.” Or Seborga, but Feliciano’s other brothers were anything but helpful on short notice. Turning up alone outside Hogwarts would have appeared neglectful at best, but Feliciano was still surprised, standing frustratingly below his sister’s narrow shoulder, when instead of just marching and growling at him under her breath, she stopped in Hogsmeade’s central street with him in the Saturday light and offered him a hand.

“No, you’re making it sound like a threat.”

“The answer was yes, which was why he accepted the hand and closed his eyes tight for the uncomfortably tight squeeze through darkness that consumed them. It was dumb but Feliciano landed back in sunlight with his free hand curling and uncurling, shoulders tense and knees a little weak as he bent his legs in a bit of a crouch before standing up properly again. Sicily handled so much Magical Ministry business that there was no way she’d make a stupid mistake the way England had, the fear was uncomfortable and cold down his spine, contrasted with the lingering burn in his gloved fingertips.

Professor Malfoy wasn’t the one to meet them at the open gates this time, but rather someone in a bright fuschia robe whose appearance made Feliciano swallow a groan and even Chiara gave an annoyed little grunt in the back of her throat. Professor Huntington’s turquoise shoes and hat made her red hair stand out even more vibrantly than normal, and the way her red lips tried to smile at Chiara looked forced and uncomfortable. It wasn’t the worst Feliciano had ever seen her, but all three of them silently agreed to make the exchange as fast and painless as possible.

“Missus Vargas.”

“Professor Huntington.” Feliciano was not addressed, and he didn’t try to say anything as the regional power spoke over his head: “The gloves on his hands serve a cosmetic function, when they are no longer required he will stop wearing them.”

“I’m sorry?” Chiara wasn’t in the mood to pretend she wanted to stay at the school for more than a
few minutes, but Feliciano couldn’t fault her for that as his history teacher looked at him and then
down at the black Hogwarts gloves wrapped around his hands. They were school standard, but even
Scottish springs were warm enough to make them a useless addition.

“Show her, don’t drag this out.” That command was for him, and Feliciano wondered if maybe he’d
defy her just to make Chiara turn purple. Instead he was already pulling the glove off his right hand,
and he watched Professor Huntington’s whole face twist and frown as she gave an uncomfortable
shake.

New flesh was always a little bit paler and pinker than normal, tender to the touch and sensitive for
the first few days. His wrist and arm were properly back to normal, but his fingers were badly
discoloured and aside from his thumb, none of his other fingers had grown their last knuckles back
yet. An enchantment on the gloves helped firm up the tips so he could write at least, but it was
always going to be a bit jarring to see fingers that ended too soon and were misshapen right at the
end around the last bits of fully regrown bone. He slipped the glove back on a moment later, the
silence tense and awful in the sunlight.

“They should finish mending by the end of next week, so there is no need to send him to the school
healer.” Chiara explained, leaving Feliciano in what was supposed to appear like a guilty silence.
“The discomfort is punishment in lieu of not being expelled. Please, pass my husband’s kind regards
for the school on to the rest of the staff for their consideration.”

Professor Huntington looked like she wanted to say something but couldn’t think of what. Feliciano
took a touch on the shoulder from Chiara and started walking, passing through Hogwarts’ open iron
gates and crossing over the barrier charms obediently to stand next to the woman who made his
academic life here painful. As soon as the History Professor croaked out a yes and a thank you for
the kind words, Chiara of Sicily nodded only once before turning away from Feliciano and
Hogwarts on her heel, and with a loud snap and crack, she vanished.

Somewhere far beyond where Chiara had been standing, Feliciano thought he saw a flash of blue.

“Well then, Mister Vargas: welcome home.” That was… one way of putting it.
The Bitter Road

Arthur’s return to Hogwarts had not been especially easy. There was something unbearably sour about taking back parting words spat at someone else’s feet because neither of you could live up to the spiteful obligation. Waiting until September to come back to the castle was exactly that: a promise Arthur couldn’t keep.

Missing friends was a minor inconvenience, but trying to avoid the Headmistress’ ire and trusting her not to fail either nation for the year and hold them back simply took things out of Arthur’s hands. He returned to the school almost two weeks after the incident and his suspension, and he came back with no word on when Mister Vargas would be joining them.

He told the children exactly what he had told the professors, every word of the lie exactly the same and countered with all the grains and patches of truth: Vargas had gone running like a lunatic into the forest, Arthur had gone after him to stop him from getting hurt. There had been a fight, Arthur had apparated, and Italy had been terribly injured as a result.

It was hard to be so forthright with the last two points. He very much wanted to deny the last one but there was ultimately no way around simple truth. He had hurt Italy, it was his fault, but he was completely mum on the fact that he’d been to Venice and seen how his recovery was progressing.

And Arthur knew, implicitly, that the other Slytherins were not completely satisfied with his answers.

“You don’t… really seem that sorry.” Charlie was the one to point it out shyly, voice faltering in the library during a quiet Saturday study session. Ellie was sitting next to him with Addison Miller comparing notes with David off to Arthur’s left, and Arthur looked up slowly from his Arithmancy book and the stack of essays and assignments he had been plowing through to make up for lost schooling.

“What?”

“I mean, you’ve been quiet about it, Arthur, but you don’t really seem that torn up?” Oh…

“I’ll admit, I’m awfully mad at him too.” Not as angry as he had been, but steeled well enough by that insult and anger from Venice that no, he really wasn’t that upset about the issue anymore. There had been mistakes and stupidity on both ends, so Arthur just wanted to see the upset laid to rest. The ball was in Italy’s court now and Arthur wasn’t interested in chasing after him for answers. “It doesn’t matter, Charlie.” So Arthur went back to work.

“It does though…” Arthur had his quill poised to finish off a line of script explaining the consequences of Saturn’s alignment this spring when he heard the almost shy words from Charlie. Higgs was paused with his eyes staring blankly at his abandoned herbology text with last-week’s mandrake essay staring up at him half-complete. If he had anything more to say, it was interrupted by the sound of footfalls charging across stones and the ripple and snag of robes billowing from a dead sprint.

Arthur and everyone else at the table looked up to the sight of Slytherin’s Seeker charging across the library floor, broom in hand and green and silver quidditch robes still fluttering around him from the practice he’d just been at, eyes focused on their table. Charlie already had his book shut and was standing when Scorpius blazed a path right up to the startled group and then swung around behind Addison and David’s chairs to get to Arthu-?
“He’s back—”

“What?”

“He’s back, c’mom, get up!” And with a flick of Scorpius’ wand Arthur’s books were snapped shut, assignments folded and tucked neatly between pages, and even Arthur’s quill tugged itself out of his grasp to fly away into his book bag.

“Now see, why can’t you do that with your socks?” Arthur complained, aware of how grandfatherly it made him sound as he was coaxed and urged and outright poked into finishing the clean-up and standing. “If he’s back then he certainly won’t want to see me.”

“How do you know he’s here?” Charlie asked. The announcement was enough to get everyone else cleaning up too, even Addison and David were capping their ink and stuffing class notes down between textbooks in their bags.

“Saw him as we were coming back from the final practice!” Scorpius rushed to explain, getting Arthur’s robe up off the back of the chair where he’d shrugged it off and thank you, Scorpius he could dress himself! “Professor Huntington was leading him someplace while the team took a lower stairwell to get down to the dungeons, so I broke away and hurried here.”

They reasoned that Huntington had either been on her way to take Vargas off to some inane detention period, or more likely for a visit to Professor Malfoy in the hospital wing. Arthur was hustled off to the fourth floor without being given much opportunity to argue his way out of it, giving up with a heavy sigh and simply allowing his friends to chaperone him along through panels of sunlight. Four Slytherins, a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff made for a strange sight. Scorpius leading them all in his quidditch robes all mucked up with grass and dirt from the year’s final practice only made it better, but the oddities helped them make good time to the white double doors of the infirmary.

Doors which were, for the record, swinging open as they arrived and brought a familiar olive-skinned, green-robed almost-fourteen-year-old boy into view. Arthur understood the black gloves he saw around Italy’s hands and the minor slump of his shoulders as he personally slowed down and twisted back a little so everyone else could hurry ahead and mob the other nation.

“Vargas!” Which they all eagerly did.

“Feli, you’re back!”

Ellie was the first one to get there and Italy looked up just in time to catch her in a quick, happy hug when she flung her arms around his shoulder and then fell away again. This gave Charlie, who was so much taller, the space to come in and give him a hard hit in the shoulder and demand to know where the devil he’d been. David swept up to hover right in front of him with curious words relaying how the teachers had been baffled about what to do with the empty seat in their lessons.

“Everyone was just so worried about you!” Ellie carried on, her voice pleasantly strong even from where Arthur was still hanging back and observing. “Flint has just been unbearable since Arthur came back.”

“She’s in detention today, that one.” Scorpius explained, filling in something Arthur already knew because he’d been physically present when something had passed between Flint and one of their Gryffindor classmates during Longbottom’s final exam. Whatever it was had ended with someone getting cactus juice squirted in their eyes. “I don’t think she’s ever even had detention before.”
“I’ll apologize to her, I don’t…” however Italy wanted to end that sentence was interrupted for Arthur by a dull jab in his ribs under his folded arms. Jumping slightly, he turned and saw Miss Miller standing there next to him. Her cropped gold hair was still growing out at funny angles, nowhere near settled down yet after it’s sheering a few months ago. She was giving him such a wide-eyed, affronted look that Arthur was worried he’d stepped on her foot.

“What was that for?”

“Go on, talk to him!” She hissed at him, which was rather unfair.

“He’s quite busy.”

“He’s your friend, go!”

Arthur refused, he wasn’t interested in pushing through the mirthful excitement of the children seeing their friend well and standing again just to pick a fight or bring a cold wind blowing through the hall. They had parted bitterly in Venice and Arthur was of a mind to let sleeping dogs lie as long as possible. Italy wasn’t known for carrying a grudge any more than he was for losing his temper in the first place. If given enough time, he would calm down on his own and the two of them would agree to either end the charade or get back to work.

“I’ve been to both Rome and London today, when’s dinner?” Italy’s complaint about food was a good enough reason to break eye-contact with the very disapproving Ravenclaw to Arthur’s left. Addison’s irritation with him was rank just from the way he felt her continue to stare at the side of his head.

“You just missed lunch about an hour ago,” Charlie was explaining. “But there should be some snacks down in the common room.”

“We were all studying in the library when Scorpius came running to get us.” Ellie added, Scorpius nodding along with them before Italy spoke. He was as light-hearted and conversational as ever, which for the sake of keeping the peace, Arthur appreciated. This wasn’t going to be so difficult after all.

“I need to review for my exams too, how many have I missed?”

“At least three, I think.” Scrorpius answered and Arthur tried thinking back. History of Magic and Herbology had happened last week, one just to get the third years out of the way and the other because their plants had ripened and matured faster than expected. Arthur had rolled his eyes at making the final preparations on a plant he’d shared with Italy, but done no less of a job with it. Passing the year was essential. The third one was probably Astronomy or Divination, he couldn’t recall after such a hectic week.

They started moving as a group after a bit more chatter, destined for the dungeons and yet refusing to part with their out-of-house friends right away. They moved with Scorpius as always at the head of the train, David and Charlie flanking Italy in the middle, and when Arthur tried bringing up the rear behind Ellie and Addison he was turned on almost immediately by both girls.

“What are you doing?” Addison hissed again, getting Eliza’s attention right away.

“I’m walking?” Arthur tried to answer, only to bite his tongue when he saw the hurt expression on Ellie’s round face.

“Why aren’t you talking to him?” No, no, no: not the big cute eyes, Ellie, that simply wasn’t fair! “I bet he missed you so much if you’d only say something!”
“He missed Baker and Higgs, not-”

“Arthur Kirkland I’ve seen field mice with more sense than you.” Now see here, Miss Miller!

Despite Ellie’s almost tears and Addison’s venomous stares, Arthur maintained his silence all the way to Slytherin House. He was not wrong to walk this path because Italy didn’t once turn around to speak to him when he went downstairs to the dormitory to take a look over his belongings. Arthur vouched to remain in the common room and keep Ellie company; a decision he soon regretted because instead of actually crying, he made her quite cross with him instead.

“I keep telling you: he’s mad at me.”

“He is not mad; he has never been mad before.” Oh, if only he could have told Miss Gamp how wrong she was! “If you don’t stop and at least welcome him back home then I’ll be mad at you instead!” And she rather was, especially after the common room doors opened up and let Flint and Finnick into the chamber in a flurry, the two of them promptly banishing Arthur and Ellie to a couch so Flint could overwhelm Italy with her voice and another fierce (and rather possessive) hug when he reappeared from the boy’s dorm. Scorpius was dressed in plain clothes again under his school robe instead of the quidditch get-up, explaining what had taken them so long, and he made a rude gagging gesture behind his hand at Gloria’s enthusiastic welcome.

“You see? I think he feels quite welcomed without me.” Arthur preened, turning a glowing smile on Ellie beside him as Higgs sat down and looked like he might give Arthur a swat.

“But what are these ugly things you’ve got on?”

“They’re not ugly!” Italy’s whining voice pulled Arthur from his scolding to see the other nation quickly backing down the staircase beyond the gender charm to stop Gloria from fussing at him so much. The aggressive young witch stomped her foot and huffed at him dangerously from the top step while Scorpius laughed and Charlie and Margaret Finnick both tried talking her down. “I just have to wear them for a few more days, that’s all.”

Arthur almost tried to smile at the frantic cover, but before he could even try it there was a sour sting in the back of his throat, not to mention the uncomfortable weight over his shoulders. No. The reason behind the gloves was no laughing matter, and he was probably only wearing two to try and make it a bit less conspicuous. The only friend of theirs Arthur was willing to bet had a chance of knowing the full official story about the forest was Scorpius, and that was only if he and his father had come together to talk about it.

Chancing another look back at Scorpius as the gloves were brought up and dismissed just that easily by the others, it took until Italy came back up into the common room to be sure, but… Yes.

Just the way his eyes followed Italy’s right side, and the way he positioned himself so Italy’s arm was always just a little obscured and it would be difficult to pass between them. He knew… something.

“You’re even worse than Arthur about answering your letters, Vargas.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Charlie!”

Just the way Scorpius was the very first person to stop bothering Arthur to talk to him on that first day. That uneasy look from beside the fire when instead of sitting down next to anyone Italy took a high backed green chair, and Scorpius placed himself so he could see everyone from behind it. Little
details which made a very obvious impact from the start: he knew. Maybe not the truth, but Scorpius knew.

But Scorpius still helped gang up and get them sitting next to each other at dinner, where Arthur resolved to spend the evening talking to Margaret at his right and Eliza across the table, and Italy carried on a short but delightful conversation with the second years sitting next to him.

They were given a free pass that night by Scorpius and Charlie so they could get to bed early and sleep. Arthur was kept awake by his own thoughts for too much of the night, nevermind the ambient glow of Italy’s stone bed and the occasional hiss of discomfort from the other nation and his stinging hand. Although he knew it would wake Charlie up, Arthur drew a breath.

“Is it healing?” Healing with the charm on, nevermind the great distance between Hogwarts and Rome, would slow things down. But as long as it didn’t stop….

“Slowly…” It was his right hand, the dominant one.

“Can you write like that?”

“Do I have a choice?”

The sting on the end of his reply prompted Arthur to roll over, punch up his pillow for comfort, and will himself to a deep and pleasantly pain-free sleep. If it was possible to spite someone by resting comfortably, then Arthur was willing to figure out and perfect the technique.

Judging by the seething Sunday morning look burning under Italy’s sleepy grin the next morning, he succeeded.

They didn’t say a word to each other at breakfast despite Charlie chewing his sausage like a cow with cud watching them. When Italy weaseled his way out of flying to take up Gloria’s offer to help him study for his first make-up exam on Monday, Ellie decided it was all Arthur’s fault.

“You’re being childish!”

“Me? Eliza, he’s just as much-”

“You’re both being childish!” she amended, which allowed Arthur to finish his meal with a clear conscience once Italy was long gone off with Flint. “Talk to him!”

“We had a chat last night.”

“You’re a liar, Kirkland.” Oh, for goodness sake, Charlie. “No! Don’t look at me like that. Unless that’s it from now until graduation for your two, you need to talk to him.”

“We’ll talk when we’re good and ready, thank you.” And that, as far as Arthur was concerned, was the end of the matter.

He’d come back too soon.

One day- just one more day at home and Feliciano was sure his hand would have finished healing completely. His knuckles would have regrown at least most of the way, fingertips fleshed out and nerves fully restored. If he’d stayed in Rome or Venice for another twenty-four hours to sleep and eat and socialize without interruption, then it would be over with and all he’d have to worry about was a
bit of ugly discolouration across his fingers.

Instead he’d come back early, and between the charm like an ice-cold noose around his neck and the agonizing distance from his warm and beautiful home to this cold and dreary castle, he felt his recovery stall right before the finish line.

“Ahh…” Right before the finish line meant that no, he wasn’t in any real pain anymore, but he was suspended in the crippling sensation of a healing itch. The slow, steady burn of nerve endings slowly realigning and flickering back to life, like a permanent state of pins-and-needles that was concentrated fully around his fingertips. His thumb had healed and finally stopped stinging yesterday after he’d spent the last half of the weekend avoiding the question of when to talk to England, but his other four fingers were trapped. If he’d stuck his hand in a bee-hive, the noxious buzzing would have been comparable.

He just wanted to slam his fingers against the desk as he dropped his quill again, pulling his hand into his lap and massaging his thumb down hard into the palm of his afflicted hand, air hissing between this clenched teeth as he sat there on the padded blue bench in the front of the otherwise empty chamber. Glancing up quickly, the ornate brass clock on Professor Huntington’s wall was ticking away mercilessly, thirty of his precious fifty minutes already gone and most of the essay he’d been in the middle of floundering through splotched and messy in front of him.

It was hard enough remembering bits and pieces of junk he’d barely listened to Romania gab about on the phone earlier that week, but getting through the maddening itch in his fingertips first made the whole thing feel impossible. He just had to score high enough to pass the class as a whole, something he wasn’t in danger of failing anyways as long as he got at least half the points the stiff-lipped witch behind the desk was looking for.

As exams were completed, students were dismissed from those lesson blocks for more studying and socializing: this was the normal time of day for the third years to have their history of magic lesson, but Feliciano was the only one sitting in for the make-up exam. He had to curb the urge to slam his fingertips into the desk like it was a circulation issue. The feeling had nothing to do with blood-flow, it was the fact that his body was trying to put the web of nerves in his fingertips back together, but wasn’t smart enough to lay the wiring first and jump-start the connections after.

On the upside, this was probably the first piece of writing Feliciano had ever handed in that actually looked like a thirteen year old had written it. Picking up the quill again slowly, he wrapped his left hand hard around the right to try and keep the nib steady, and began to slowly scratch away at the parchment.

Four minutes later, he pressed the wrong way trying to curve his ‘g’ properly and the quill split, bleeding black ink across the brown parchment which soaked in and marred the bottom half of the page where the rest of his answer was supposed to go. He was too baffled to scramble and clean it up, staring at the stain and then the disloyal feather in his grasp before giving up.

School was not supposed to be this hard! He was an adult, not a child! He was too frustrated to think straight and he was too close to tears to keep his head up! Folding his arms over the paper, Feliciano dropped his head with an outraged gasp, eyes closed because he didn’t care about the ink that was soaked up by his black school robe, he just wanted to calm down before trying again.

“Mister Vargas.” He had about thirty seconds to just sit there and swear over and over in his head before he was called to sit up, spine snapping straight and eyes burning almost as badly as his fingers as he wrenched open his bag where it was on the floor under the desk and he pulled out another quill. He was not going to quit, he only had another fifteen minutes of this room and her presence before he’d be free until next year. “Mister Vargas.”
“Yes, Professor.” What did she want? He already had the new nib dipped in ink and was struggling to rearrange his desk so he could pull out a fresh sheet of parchment. Alright, he was going to cut it close with this exam since it was going to be unfinished, but at least he’d hand this essay in without the great black blotch on the front.

He was about to touch the quill to the parchment when he stopped, left hand bracing his wrist again like before, fingertips numbly rolling the feather between them trying to restore some of the normal sensation. She’d called him twice but not answered, so with a frustrated but guilty look, he raised his eyes up to her desk.

Professor Huntington had been silently working on something up at her desk for the entire length of the exam. Feliciano didn’t fault her for it, she wasn’t allowed to fall asleep or do anything fun while observing the test, but it looked like she’d paused in the middle of whatever it was, eyes on him and painted lips in a thick straight line across her face. She wasn’t smiling, and he saw the tall yellow plume of her quill dip and spin around as she rolled it between her fingertips.

He didn’t like Professor Huntington and the feeling was mutual, but as more precious time ticked away, Feliciano felt a quiet sense of dread creep up on him: she wouldn’t really try to sabotage his exam by distracting him like this, would she?

“Which question are you on, Mister Vargas?” He had thirteen minutes left of the five-question exam, and looking back down at the question sheet and then his half-formed essays, he answered.

“The third one.” A mind-numbing short essay about what Dorinel the Daring’s campaign against Unicorn hunting had meant for the development of modern wand-making techniques in the seventh century. The blood and horns had obvious magical properties, but he couldn’t remember if the advantages of Unicorn leather had come from Huntington’s lectures or his own personal experience with the material…

“Which materials have you chosen for number three?” The question… surprised him?

“Ve… Unicorn horn and blood so far… and skin.”

“Why blood?”

“Uh-?”

“Stand up, Mister Vargas.” Confused, Feliciano did so, nudging the bench back just enough so he had the space to do as instructed. “Why did you choose unicorn blood?”

“Because…” he couldn’t remember, but nudging the fresh parchment aside he decoded his own broken script for the answer. “Because before to the ban, wand wood was soaked in unicorn blood to give it more power and higher magical conductivity, with the risk of the wand’s spirit growing too strong or turning evil.”

“And the horn?”

“Under special circumstances unicorn horns are still harvested, but not for wands: the horn used to be a common core wand ingredient but was unstable and prone to dying unexpectedly after duels. Dorinel the Daring’s father was killed in a duel when his unicorn horn wand suddenly died.”

“And the hide?”

“Unicorn hide was…” Oh please, let him get this right! “Used to craft wand sleeves, and meant to protect the delicate core pieces. Instead, they only made the sentience issues worse.” Vengeful wands
were perhaps one of the most dangerous things in the world. There was a reason why expelled magic users had theirs snapped, along with those who found themselves in prison or bound for execution…

There was a dry scratching sound whispering from Professor Huntington’s desk and her shuddering quill, but then she looked up again expectantly.

“Question four.” He had ten minutes left. “Six marks; name three valuable magical materials which drove the Italian Markets after the Fall of Rome, and their primary uses.” This one he could do!

“Silk: enriched with living patterns, used as wall-hangings in colder nations like Great Britain and Scandinavia. Used for clothing throughout central Europe. Special bolts could speak and offer advice once translation charms were fixed to them.”

“That’s two marks.” Yes, he wasn’t finished yet.

“Spices, specifically cinnamon, cardamom, cayenne, and tea: all factor into potion making as non-magical flavour and medical aids, tea leaves for advanced and developing divination practices, hotter spices are still used in house-hold repellants.” That rush of information gave him four marks, and Feliciano had to close his eyes with his hands held tight behind his back. He knew this and he remembered it, but divorcing muggle memories from magical ones, plus trying to remember what had been in his textbook versus just off-hand in memory was hard. But at least speaking was so much easier than writing. “And texts, texts in any language but specifically Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Sanskrit. Anything in a non-latinate alphabet sold for inflated prices whether they were star-charts, potion recipes, textile graphs, or almanacs.”

The quill scratched again, whispering as Feliciano looked up quickly at the seven minutes on the ticking clock. He was in the clear after answering four questions, wasn’t he?

“Question five:” the professor read, eyes clearly down so she didn’t have to bother with looking at him. “Of the three eighth century goblin rebellions, which one had the greatest impact on the textile industry of Great Britain, and why?” Th-

“There were three?” That was… not the right answer. His eyes wandered back up to the polished clock and just hovered there, his mind flicking through notecards that were all blank or filled with information that couldn’t help him. “Vee…” CO-2 emissions for the last ten years weren’t going to help him anymore than the tax reforms his new government was trying to bring in. Yes he could remember the working-holiday agreement he’d drafted with Turkey, but no he didn’t know what goblins had to do with Chinese silk and pointed hats. “There was, um…”

She wasn’t staring at him, she was waiting for him to answer with her eyes still watching the page in front of her where she must have made notes on his other answers. No he wasn’t prepared for an oral exam, but if he’d still been writing things down he’d probably have given up and doodled a cat on the space left for this one.

The itching in his hand, temporarily eased by having to talk instead of manipulate his fingers, was back again. He caught himself digging the not-quite healed ends into his own side trying to ease the tingles, but it wasn’t helping him answer and there were only three more minutes left on the clock.

“Goblins… can’t sew.” Well if he was going down he might as well go down singing. “But they’re very good at football, a muggle spot played with two nets and a ball using only your feet. So I think they played so much football in the rainy English weather that they made everyone’s clothes dirty and that forced all the wizards and witches to go out and buy brand new robes!”

Now Professor Huntington was staring at him, head still angled down the exact same way but her
eyes, oh, those piercing pale eyes. He saw her dark red lips tug and twist at each other like she was going to scowl at him, but then she simply took a full breath in through the nose and sat up straight behind her desk, shoulders hiked up and rolling a little to limber herself up after sitting in the same position for so long.

“I believe you meant soccer and will be taking that into account.” Oh, don’t even start with that. He-

“You may hand in your written answers and clean up, Mister Vargas: the exam is over.” He-! He… he was just going to take his dismissal and go…

“Thank you, Professor.” Walking up to her, he didn’t pay attention to which hand he used to pass over the parchment sheets, realizing it was his right hand when Huntington paused after taking hold of them from across the desk. She didn’t say anything snide or condescending to him, just settled her eyes on his gloved hand briefly before clearing her throat and giving a small sideways jerk of her head.

“See to it that you rest that hand of yours, Mister Vargas.” She didn’t make eye-contact with him again, simply looked down at his essays and flipped to find the final page he’d marred with the split quill. “Your other instructors may not be as accommodating.”

“Yes…” It was fine. If that was how she wanted to take things, he didn’t mind anymore. Thirty seconds and he’d have two months of freedom. “Again, thank you, Professor.”

“You are dismissed.”

And he took that dismissal ten seconds before the distant toll of the school’s bell like a man out of prison. Another four years of this? He was going to have to talk to McGonagall about exemptions or private lessons or something if Hogwarts decided to keep Binns’ replacement. Maybe he could bring back Professor Binns?

The rest of the school would lynch him if he dared.

“There you are!” Feliciano jumped when he stepped out into the sun-drenched corridor of the fifth floor and saw Gloria Flint standing with her arms folded and a suspiciously familiar large black case at her feet. A quick glance up and down the hall showed Margaret Finnick sitting on the floor a few feet away with a book in her lap and a lock of red hair spun around her finger where she was studying, but he didn’t have much time to wave at her with a smile before Gloria was on him again. Or on him still, whichever was closer.

“Gloria is that my-?”

“Honestly you had us both utterly flustered waiting for you to finish up in there!” Gloria scolded him harshly, a deadpan stare over her shoulder from Margaret clarifying that there was no truth behind that ‘us’. “After letting you borrow my notes for the exam I thought you’d finish it up in less than half the given time, what happened?”

“I can’t write, Gloria, it’s really hard-”

“Then you should quit making up excuses and go see the professor!” He didn’t want to be yelled at! Why was she always yelling at him? Why did she seem to think yelling at him would make him like her more? “But we both know you won’t do that, so answer the question instead: how did it go?”

“Very, very badly.” He watched her jaw drop wide open and her dark eyes expand before a disgusted snarl started in the back of her throat, but before she could go any further with it he cut her off with: “Is that my guitar case?” Because that was definitely his guitar case. If anyone else in
Hogwarts’ music program had an Italian flag stuck on their instrument case, Feliciano would have *known* about it. It was his business to keep track of things like that!

“We brought it to help you practice for your music final.” Margaret finally spoke up, her book and notes put away now. The easy tone in her voice made the calming touch she laid on her best friend’s wrist and arm all the more effective. Margaret had the habit of walking around with her nose just as high as Gloria, but she wasn’t half as scary.

“But our next exam is potions with Slughorn isn’t it?” He almost finished the question before Gloria’s snarl turned into a fed up groan in his direction.

“No, no, Feliciano we *told* you: Slughorn’s exam was last Friday.” Which meant he got to take another make-up test… “But we asked Professor McRuth and your music final is today in fourth period.”

“Yes, and I have the sheet music for it, I just-” Back to his *other* question! “I left the guitar on my bed this morning, how did you get it?” He’d left it there because he could barely play it with his hand like this. Other instruments he could probably handle, but nothing that required sensation in his fingertips or at least numbness and trust in muscle memory. He could barely hold a pen and he’d been writing letters for over a thousand years, how could he handle a guitar? He was hoping that the professor would just let him sing the scales instead!

But his questions put both girls on the defensive, because Gloria didn’t break into a cackle and explain her marvelous plan to him, and Margaret didn’t swoop in with her easy mannerisms to clear the air and get them moving to wherever the girls wanted him to practice for them. The two were best friends, but they shared an awkward best-friend look that communicated nothing useful to him, and then Feliciano’s hopes fell.

“So you asked Scorpius?” So he tried to lead them to a better answer than, one, breaking down the gender charm, or two-

“Well, he *is* your best friend.” Or *that*. He’d been hoping it wasn’t that. The way Margaret shrugged her shoulders and swayed a little over her own feet didn’t make the blow any easier. Feliciano stood there with the corner of his mouth between his teeth, chewing on his lips because he didn’t know how to react at first, but the urge to smile and brush it off was growing. He liked that option a little bit more too, something to keep the conflict mild and under the surface where unhappy things belonged, not full and in everybody’s face clouding the air and ruining the end of the school year.

He decided he was going to smile about it and laugh. England wasn’t here, and that was more important.

“Well, just don’t do it again, I think.” If Kirkland wanted to be Feliciano’s ‘friend’ again, then he’d have to give back what he’d stolen, wouldn’t he? It seemed a fair ransom to him!

The book Feliciano had risked and lost his life to find belonged in Rome, not London. The headmistress of this school had promised it to the nations and then turned around and handed it to her own government instead. He was either going to get an act of good faith out of England, or Feliciano was going to make the next few years of this investigation awfully hard on him.

“Come on! I know the best place to practice.” And until then, he would be everyone *else’s* friend instead.
Arthur wanted to scream.

‘Potter won’t release the book.

-D.A., Kingdom of Scotland’

This was no petty issue of jurisdiction! Arthur almost tore the letter from Scotland in half when he read it that morning on their last day at Hogwarts. He stomped back down to the great hall from the owlery, dropping himself down amidst the chatter of homebound students at the Slytherin table to seethe.

Their friends were entirely fed up with the way he and Italy refused to kiss and make up, but with this latest bad news in hand Arthur was sick of the issue and wanted nothing more to do with it. He didn’t want to talk about Gryffindor seizing another House Cup Win right out from Slytherin’s nose thanks to those dashed two hundred points from his and Italy’s suspension. He didn’t want to talk about how the house cup announcement had come with a hex that turned all the first years’ robes Gryffindor red (and he did mean all the first years, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw collectively had not been impressed). So he certainly didn’t want to deal the other nation who didn’t even look up or acknowledge him when they were forced to sit next to each other for breakfast. Fine, be that way! He was entirely fed up and doggedly counting down the hours until he wouldn’t have to deal with Italy again directly until the end of summer.

He could handle a conference or two, he was sure, but no more of this living within ten feet of each other at all hours! It was driving Arthur positively mad.

He didn’t bother writing another letter down to London or attempting to inform Italy of the upset in the bureaucracy, he’d be home by the end of the day and fully capable of marching into the Ministry and likely taking Mister Potter by the tie and giving him a good shake for all the trouble he was causing. But until he could get his hands on the source of his grief, Arthur had to just sit there at the Slytherin table and stab at his eggs like they’d offended him.

“Before I bother telling you why I’m asking, are you even going to be in Britain for the summer, Vargas?” He beat his eggs a little harder listening to Scorpius break out the traditional summer vacation spiel from across the table.

“I don’t think so, my brother wants me home.”

“Kirkland?”

“Oh probably.” He committed, primarily out of spite after Italy’s rejection, but also because he really wasn’t sure about how busy he’d be after the end of next week. It certainly brightened Scorpius up a little bit, the pale boy sitting a little straighter over a bit of toast and jam. “What are you planning this year?”

“Quidditch world cup is happening over in Ireland.” Err, Arthur probably would have to ask and make sure that was alright. He certainly got on better with his sister now, but not by a great deal. “My family’s all going, so’s Charlie’s.”

“Tom’s team plays one more game next Saturday,” It was hard to forget that Thomas Higgs was a professional Quidditch player now, albeit a rookie, because Charlie enjoyed talking about it almost as much as Scorpius loved listening and vicariously living out the dream. “If they win it then they’re in for the cup!”

Letting the conversation revolve around Quidditch kept the nations from having to interact directly.
With their dorms and trunks already set in order they went from the great hall outside in order by year to reach the carriages down to Hogsmeade. First-years were called first to leave the castle, and by the time the third-years made their chatty way through the massive stone doors Arthur and Italy had already freed themselves of the little cage their classmates kept building by constantly circling around them. No, they were not going to talk: there was no need to risk a spat.

The weather was positively delightful, but Arthur hadn’t a care for the sweet scent of fresh grass or the cheerful summer sunlight bathing the landscape. Hogsmeade was snow-bound for much of the year and the wind was still rather chilly for the season, but it was gloriously bright and utterly useless at changing his mood. In fact, as they arrived at the bustling train station and navigated the jets of steam and streams of underclassmen to climb about the Hogwarts express, things only went downhill.

It was normal for the third year Slytherins to split up to filter into compartments before the upperclassmen could catch up and bully them out of the way. Instead of splitting up five and two as they normally did, Italy moved without a word and ducked into the same compartment as Flint and Finnick, leaving the other three children scandalized and Arthur forcefully ushering them into their own little box of seats before it could be snatched up.

“Did you see that?” Charlie gasped, falling on his seat like a rock next to the door as Arthur muscled Scorpius inside after Ellie and then closed the compartment up once they were all in. He turned back around to Charlie gesturing with big empty hands and wide eyes staring around the space like he’d never seen the brown seat covers or the faces of his friends before. “He just went on his own merry way without even a look back! Unbelievable!”

“I know he’s easily caught up in things-” Ellie squeaked, “-but that was just- just-”

“Just rude is what it was,” Scorpius finished off, arms folded and sitting next to Ellie who had the pleats of her skirt balled up hard in her hands, twisting the grey fabric back and forth with nerves showing. “So what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Oh, not this again-” Arthur started, but was quickly cut off by Charlie behind him.

“You’ve got to stop saying this isn’t you fault, because even if it isn’t he certainly thinks the opposite!” Look at him, being spoon-fed advice by teenagers!

“Look, I know what will calm him down,” Arthur soothed, walking from the door over to the window so he could turn around and see all three children clearly. “I just have to get home and fetch it. We wrote to each other- only a little, but we did try to talk things out while on suspension.” Eliza just shook her head like he was lying, mouth scrunched up in an ugly way which warned of tears on the horizon.

“Then why are you being so awful to each other?” Just because they’d spoken didn’t mean they hadn’t argued for most of that, but Arthur wasn’t willing to say it. “It’s miserable watching you two walk around with your noses in the air.”

“I promise we’ll work something out by September.”

“Or Flint will catch him in her web and we’ll never see or hear of him again.” Arthur sincerely doubted that Italy was mad enough to make a habit of spending eight hours locked in a tiny compartment with Gloria Flint fawning and nagging over him. Still, just the snide way Scorpius made the comment made Charlie roll his eyes and Ellie gave him a push on the arm while muttering ‘that’s not funny’ softly under her breath.
Exhausted all over again by both the drama and the charade, Arthur Kirkland pulled his skinny pre-teen knees up under his chin, tucked himself down in the corner of his seat, and stubbornly decided to nap most of the way from Hogsmeade down to London.

Thirty minutes after leaving Hogsmeade Feliciano regretted the decision not to sit with his usual friends: he would have happily traded England for Gloria. As tense and angry as the other nation made him, at least Feliciano knew how far he could push back against Arthur before running the risk of damaging some integral piece of his soul. Gauging that distance with a human girl was much, much harder, especially because of how hard he choked just trying to talk her down in the first place.

“I think it’s rather marvelous that you’ve broken off with Kirkland.” What an awful thing for her to say, Feliciano just sat there staring at her where she’d claimed the spot right next to him on the compartment seat. “Half-bloods aren’t that far from Mudbloods after all, or so my father says, and you should know his opinion of House Kirkland isn’t very high either for that matter.”

“You should really stop and listen to yourself sometimes, Gloria.” The witch tilted her head with big blue eyes to the side, brown hair coiled over her shoulder in a thick braid ending with a sharp green ribbon. Her pouty little mouth was pursed, but Feliciano lost the will to push through and try to scold her again. She was thirteen, she’d either see it eventually or grow old enough for him to take her seriously. For now, he had to settle with: “My family has a very good opinion of House Kirkland, enough that they sent me here to Hogwarts with him.”

“But if you’d only convince your brother to spend a few weeks here in Britain then my father could easily aquatint your family with the right kinds of people!” She wasn’t very good at pleading or at accepting rejections. While Feliciano sighed under his breath wondering how long the train ride would last, she took his gloved hand between both of hers and held it warmly. She was smiling at him now, almost eager to please but at the same time going the wrong way with it.

“Gloria.” He warned, tugging his hand back gently, she didn’t let go and he had to settle for anxiously thumbing the clasp of his book-bag with his other hand, the satchel resting in his lap for the journey. He’d hoped to pass some of the time today sketching the landscapes they passed on the train but that probably wasn’t going to work out. His fingers were stiff: all normal and as expected, but the more he used his hand the faster it would recover now that the painful parts were over.

“What’s the point of you coming this far for schooling if you’re only going to mingle with the rabble?” She pouted, encouraging Margaret to look up from the book she was reading across the compartment next to the window. “Playing those awful muggle sports and always hanging around Kirkland. Like I said, cutting off ties with him is the best move you could have made! It’s a decent start.”

“Higgs and Malfoy are just as pure as you are,” Feliciano tried to keep his tone mild but he watched the words needle her anyways, the warm hold around his fingers tensing up. “The Gamps are an old and deeply respectable house, and again: the Vargases like the Kirklands. I like making friends, Gloria. I want you and Margaret and I to all be friends, and maybe even Albus Potter and Rose Weasley someday too. But I can’t be friends with someone who only sees people for their titles and bloodlines, and I won’t be friends with someone who laughs when I lose a friendship.”

“You’re the one who won’t so much as say his name!” Gloria bit back, finally tossing Feliciano’s hand down like something nasty she didn’t want to touch anymore. “He’s the one who got you hurt and then almost expelled, so why bother being upset about it? Stop defending him!”
“Then stop attacking him for things he can’t control!” Feliciano wanted to go home. He wanted to throw the charm in a box and go through six hours of *tax law revisions* instead of sitting here anymore and talking about England again. “Blame him for lying, blame him for being a jerk, blame him for things that are actually his fault, but leave his family out of it!”

“We lost the House Cup again this year because of you and Kirkland.” She spat venom at him with her lips curled back around her teeth, rising to stand over him instead of staying seated. She was quivering with anger, hands in tight fists at her sides as she stared down at him and hissed: “*Malfy* couldn’t catch the snitch if Potter handed it to him. You already said its *Kirkland’s fault* the headmistress took two hundred points from Slytherin, and after he couldn’t take your place in this years’ tournament, that mudblood Baker got the better of me with a spell *Higgs showed him!* As for deeply respectable Miss Gamp-!”

“Do *not* talk about them like that.” Standing up, Feliciano was still shorter than her and he was probably going to stay that way until fifth year unless she stopped growing, but he didn’t need his height: his voice worked just fine. “I’ve had enough, Gloria. You and Margaret enjoy the ride home, I’m going to sit somewhere else.”

“You can’t!” She said, sneering at him with her nose scrunched up. “The whole train is packed full!”

“I’ll make do.” He said, pushing the compartment door open.

“Oh, Feliciano *wait*.” Margaret called him and Gloria grabbed him by the sleeve of his robe, yanking him back inside before he could swing a foot out into the hall. She tossed him firmly back down on the seat and shut the door again, hands on her hips, and scolded him with one pouting lip stuck out. The nation held his breath telling himself he wasn’t half as fed up as he knew he was.

“You’re much too sensitive.” She tsked.

“Don’t talk about my friends like that, Gloria.”

“Allright fine, lets talk about you and I instead then!” That wasn’t much better, but at least Feliciano was more comfortable answering questions about Wizarding Venice and Rome than he was with listening to Gloria spout hateful things about her classmates and peers. Margaret was also allowed to join the conversation, which was a big bonus, and when the girls pulled out a deck of magical cards for a few games he touched graphite to paper and tried to wrap his stiff fingers around the strokes and smudges of the sketches.

It was a long and tedious train ride through the summer sunshine and on into late evening. When the train finally began to slow down and pull into Kings’ Cross Station in London, Feliciano changed out of his robes and was the first one out of the compartment and waiting at the door to be let out on to the platform.

South Italy and Scotland were standing there with the usual parents: Mister Gamp, Mrs. Malfoy, and a tall, lanky wizard Feliciano didn’t know whose thick black hair and long nose reminded him of Charlie- so maybe it was Mister Higgs. Wandering over to them through the clouds of steam and clusters of students and parents, Feliciano took a spot to his brother’s right and was greeted with an acknowledging touch on his shoulder.

They collected his luggage and were gone before Feliciano saw England or any of his other friends. The brothers talked in the taxi that went speeding away through the warm summer night to the airport so they could get home as soon as possible.

“Did you settle anything with Kirkland?” Lovino asked.
“No.” His brother wasn’t happy with that answer, but Feliciano didn’t have a better one for him. Lovino was wearing a muggle suit and tie because this time there was no stop-over at England’s house to change out of magical robes. Feliciano would have to wait for the airport to take off the charm in a bathroom stall and flash his ID to let the weapons that would reappear be packaged up for international travel. “But he told me Potter is getting in your way, is that true?”

“You’ll have to ask Chiara; you know she handles all that magical bullshit for me.”

Talking about magic was awkward after that. South Italy didn’t really want to look at him while he was still wearing the disguise, and North Italy wasn’t enough like himself with the charm around his neck to come up with anything better to talk about. It got a wash of nervous pin pricks running down his spine as they rode the taxi in silence, but when they were finally let out and they vanished through the plexiglass doors of the airport Feliciano ducked into the closest men’s room and sent up a fast, silent prayer that Lovino’s modifications to the rosary would help him.

He wound up on one knee coughing his insides up into the toilet bowl, head spinning and limbs shaking, but the nausea passed with the last of his candy-laden lunch. After a few minutes, Feliciano felt his senses realign and his identity come washing back down over him. And he felt better.

He wouldn’t have to wear that awful cross again for two months. He felt better…

“You’re still dressed to deal with those wackos,” Lovino complained from outside the stall, his shoes tapping irritably on the tiles. “Put these on, idiot.” A small blue duffle bag was set on the floor and kicked under the door, and Feliciano stood up properly to take a look at the blue wizarding robe he’d put on in Venice almost a month ago. The track-suit and old running shoes were much, much more comfortable as he swapped outfits and finally rejoined his brother.

An hour later they were on their flight, and two more after that…

Home.

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