### The Dead Master

by **FalconLux**

**Summary**

Dumbledore’s schemes took everything from him, including the man he loved, but now Harry has devised a means with which to travel back in time to his younger body before he started Hogwarts. He’s going to get another chance at his life, and this time Dumbledore won’t be getting in his way.

An unconventional approach to a Do Over story.

**WARNING:** This story is a W.I.P. It is not finished. It may never be finished. Updates will be sporadic. **READ AT YOUR OWN RISK.**

**Notes**

This story does bear some resemblance to Quelling, but only in superficial details. It is a very different story. Hope you like.

Oh, and **Merry Christmas** to those who celebrate.
Harry opened his eyes and was immediately overwhelmed with the desire to cackle maniacally. It was dark, but there was light enough coming from under the door for him to recognize the cupboard that had been his for ten years. He was back in the cupboard under the stairs. Which meant that it had worked.

With a sigh of tremendous satisfaction, Harry stretched his body, one limb at a time. Yep, he seemed to be about eight years old again. Then he gave a tentative stretch to his magic. It felt intact, healthy and strong and ready to respond to his slightest whim. Essentially, he still felt like himself. Physically, he was, of course, much smaller and weaker than he’d been in what felt like several lifetimes. He’d have to do something about that.

Curiously, he reached a hand up and laid two fingers against the pulse point on his neck. He moved the fingers slightly and held perfectly still.

Nope. Nothing. Finding himself alive again had been a long shot, but it wasn’t too upsetting. It had been twelve years since he’d had a pulse and it hadn’t killed him yet. He chuckled at his own morbid humor. He was the Master of Death. He couldn’t die because he was already dead. According to his research, he was more closely related to an Inferius than a vampire. Well, an extremely advanced Inferius. There was no decomposition to his body despite the lack of pulse and slightly undead pallor. His eyes remained entirely unclouded as well. He didn’t really appear dead, just freakishly pale.

Humming a quiet tune under his breath, Harry let himself out of his cupboard. He found Petunia’s handbag and relieved it of all cash, which amounted to about two hundred fifty pounds. He didn’t precisely need the money, but he enjoyed robbing his dear aunt. With that in his pocket, he stopped by the kitchen and yanked loose the gas line behind the stove, before leaving the house for the very last time. If he was lucky, the fumes would kill the whole family.

Harry arranged his mental to-do list while he strolled leisurely down the street. The Trace did not become active until a child began attending Hogwarts, which meant that he didn’t have that to worry about. Harry Potter wasn’t supposed to start Hogwarts for another three years, but he had absolutely no intention of attending Hogwarts as Harry Potter, so that was of no matter. First on the agenda then, a growth potion. They actually weren’t that difficult to make, which was handy being as Harry was certainly no potions master, but some of the ingredients were restricted. And the potion had to be somewhat modified to work with an undead body. So, he would first need to gather the ingredients and supplies.

Before he could do that, he would, of course, need money. There was Gringotts, obviously. Except that Dumbledore was his magical guardian, meaning that the second he touched his account, Dumbledore would know. So, he would need an alternate means of funds. There were many ways to gain funds, though most of them would be infinitely easier when he was older.

Well, really, the easiest thing to do would be to get himself adopted. By someone rich, of course. And preferably magical. No use dealing with the stigma of being a mudblood if it could be avoided. The prospect of pretending that he hadn’t known about the magical world until very recently was not appealing. So, he needed someone rich and magical, but preferably reclusive enough that he wouldn’t have to alter too many memories. Even better, someone who would die in
a few years and leave him an expansive inheritance.

A malicious smirk pulled at his lips as the perfect candidate came to mind. Harry skipped lightly off the road, hiding himself in the shadow of a hedge before disapparating.

Harry appeared before a massive black castle the stones hewn from the purest obsidian. He had to stand up on his toes to pull the bell cord next to the massive wrought iron gates. Approximately two seconds later, a quiet pop heralded the arrival of a house elf in a soot black toga bearing the Black insignia.

“How can Siggy be helping, Young Master?” The elf inquired enthusiastically, eyeing Harry curiously.

“Harry Potter to see Lord Black,” he said clearly.

The elf’s eyes went very wide, as he bowed, “Siggy will be informing Master right away.” With that, the elf popped away.

Harry looked back up at the castle, and leaned back on his heels to wait. He knew it would not be long.

The elf was back half a minute later, and the massive gates swung open. “Master Harry Potter, Sir, be following Siggy. Siggy will be taking you to Master Lord Black, Sir.”

“Thank you, Siggy,” Harry acknowledged absently as he began to follow the elf toward the castle. He was familiar with the Black Family Ancestral Castle, of course. He’d moved in here after killing Voldemort. The massive library had been his primary resource in crafting the means to travel back through time to his younger body.

The elf led him to an informal breakfast room where Arcturus Black was having his morning meal. He was a regal sort of man with pure white hair and clear gray eyes. Had he been a muggle, Harry would have guessed his age to be in his early sixties, though he knew for a fact that the man had recently turned eighty-seven. He had turned away from his meal and was staring at Harry with an intrigued curiosity burning in his intelligent eyes. “Heir Potter…” he said after a moment. “I must say that this is a surprise. Have you come alone?”

“I have,” Harry nodded, stepping further into the room as the elf popped away.

Arcturus studied him intently. “And why is that, Heir Potter?”

“I have a proposition for you,” Harry admitted, causing Arcturus’ brow to rise in surprise. He didn’t immediately elaborate, but instead gestured toward the meal. “May I join you? I’ve not eaten.” He had no idea how long it had been since he’d eaten – or rather, since his body had eaten. He no longer required food, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t enjoy it – crave it, even if he didn’t feel hunger.

“Of course,” Arcturus agreed graciously, gesturing toward the chair next to him.

“Thank you, Lord Black,” Harry smiled as he climbed into the chair, seating himself properly just in time for a second plate to appear in front of him. The mark of a good elf was being able to anticipate his master’s needs without having to be asked for everything directly.

Arcturus let him get started, going back to his own meal for a couple of minutes before he inquired. “You mentioned a proposition?”
Harry hummed his agreement as he cleared his mouth before answering properly. “As I am certain you are aware, I was credited with defeating the Dark Lord Voldemort when I was a baby,” he began, noting that the Lord Black did not so much as twitch at the Dark Lord’s assumed name. “The fact that I was given credit can be accredited to Albus Dumbledore,” he couldn’t help but sneer the old man’s name, which earned him a curiously lifted eyebrow from the man next to him. “I am the only survivor of that night. No one else was there. Dumbledore guessed at the chain of events and told the world as though it was fact.

“He then left me with muggles,” he almost snarled the word, which increased the light of curiosity in the gray eyes watching him, “that hate all things magical, myself most especially. Had I been a ‘normal’ child, he would have allowed me to remain entirely ignorant of the magical world until I was old enough to attend Hogwarts, failing to even give me the introduction to the wizarding world normally afforded the mudbloods. He would have manipulated me into the House of the Noble Fools, and kept me suspended upon his strings as his puppet until it was time for me to die a martyr in the name of the Light.”

He stopped there and went back to eating, knowing that Arcturus would have questions at this point.

There was a long moment of silence during which Harry ate his admittedly delicious breakfast. “You’re claiming to be some kind of Seer,” Arcturus finally postulated.

Harry gave him an amused smile, “Not quite. I was privy to one version of the future. As that changes, however, I am as ignorant as everyone else.”

“Well, you’re clearly not a normal eight-year-old,” he observed. “So you’re claiming that you Saw the future. How?”

Harry gave a moment of thought to the easiest way to explain, then shrugged, “Do you know a general diagnostic spell for use on humans?” he posed.

Arcturus stared at him for a long moment before nodding. “Cast it on me, if you would,” Harry suggested. “I think it may make my explanation a bit easier to believe.”

The older man hesitated for a moment, but then drew a willow wand from a wrist sheath and cast the spell with the ease of long practice. His face turned completely blank when he saw the result. He scrutinized Harry for a long moment, then cast a few more diagnostic charms of varied complexity and design. Finally, he lowered his wand and gave Harry an extremely intense look. “You’re dead,” he said at last. “Not a vampire or inferi or any other kind of creature or construct of which I have ever heard. You are simply dead.”

“And yet I can walk and talk and eat and cast spells,” Harry confirmed cheerfully. “How,” and this time it was more of a demand than a question.

“Have you heard the Tale of the Three Brothers by Beedle the Bard?” Harry asked casually.

Arcturus proved his quick and astute mind by answering almost immediately, “You’re suggesting that you’re the Master of Death.”

Harry smiled with pleasure at not having to spell it all out. “Precisely so,” he nodded. “And at what point did an eight-year-old manage to gather the three items?” Arcturus posed,
though with only marginal doubt. He clearly trusted his diagnostic spells.

“Oh, no, don’t be silly. I didn’t collect the last of the three items until I was eighteen. I was thirty-two when I devised the ritual to send me back into my younger body. One of the benefits of being the Master of Death is the ability to be in a ritual that would kill anyone else who attempted it. You can’t kill what is already dead, of course.”

Arcturus nodded slowly and Harry could practically see the facts lining up in his mind now that he knew Harry had come back in time. “I see,” he said after a moment. “Then I am most curious as to that proposition you mentioned.”

Harry grinned at him and pushed away his empty plate, which immediately vanished. “Regardless of what I do, so long as I remain Harry Potter, I will be caught between Dumbledore’s manipulations, Voldemort’s fear, and the Ministry’s politics. I will forever be branded by the stigma of the Boy-Who-Lived, expected to be the epitome of all that is Light and right. Thanks to Dumbledore’s games, Harry Potter will always be a public possession rather than a human being capable of free will.

“I wish to remove myself from that situation, meaning that I must reinvent my identity entirely. To do so, I require a new appearance and a new name. Now, of course, I am perfectly capable of engineering both on my own—”

“But you’d rather do it with the Black blood and name,” Arcturus acknowledged.

“I want to be your heir.”

Arcturus just gave him a very flat stare in response to that.

Harry returned a sardonic one. “What other option do you really have?” he posed. “Sirius is your last chance for an heir and he is going to die in Azkaban. Even if he didn’t, you know he would align your House with Dumbledore the first chance he got. If he dies, the Lordship will pass on to his heir. Which is Harry Potter.”

Arcturus grimaced slightly at that.

“If you disinherit Sirius, your only option is Draco Malfoy, and I promise you that you do not want that. He is a spoiled brat who has been groomed to the utter conviction of the superiority of the Malfoy line. If he were to inherit the Black estate, he would not respect that it is older and wealthier. He would use it to bring more wealth and prestige to the Malfoy line. Nothing more.”

“And you would respect it?” Arcturus posed irritably. Clearly, the subject of his lacking heir was a sore point for him.

“I am willing to make a binding magical vow to that effect, yes,” Harry agreed. “In my previous life I did inherit the Black legacy. From my perspective, I spent the last twelve years living in this castle, as a matter of fact. And I can offer you something in return that I know for a fact no one else can.”

“And what is that?” Arcturus demanded.

“Your life,” Harry answered bluntly.

Arcturus reared back in his chair, his grip tightening on the wand that he still held.

“That wasn’t a threat,” Harry assured. “I know that you are dying, Lord Black. A curse you took
in your early fifties is overcoming the barriers built around it. The healers gave you two more years at most. There’s nothing more they can do.”

“And you can?” he asked coldly.

“Yes,” Harry answered simply. “Any agreement we make may be conditional upon proof of my success.”

Autumn

“Black, Alioth!”

More than a few heads – purebloods primarily – turned curiously to take note of the unexpected new member of the Black family. It was obvious at a glance that he was a member of the Ancient and Noble family. He had shoulder-length wavy black hair tied back his at neck, crystalline gray eyes, and a nose and cheekbones that were unmistakably Black. He was wearing extremely fine uniform robes and moved with fluid grace, his chin up, shoulders back, exactly as any good pureblood should.

He lowered himself gracefully onto the stool and the Hat barely brushed his hair before shouting out, “SLYTHERIN!”

The House of Snakes gave a dignified applause in welcome as Alioth Black glided down to seat himself next to Davian Avery, the only other first year Slytherin sorted thus far.

The rest of the sorting progressed quickly, adding a total of ten new Slytherin first years. In addition to Avery and Black, they were Laurel Blishwick, Hamilton Burke, Sebastian Carrow, Roselda Dorn, Marcus Flint, Terrence Higgs, Tawny Wilkins, and Amilee Nott.

“Black,” Sebastian Carrow, a rather short and thick boy, spoke first when the meal began. “I’ve never heard of you before. Who’s your father?”

Alioth lifted an imperious eyebrow at the child, “Lord Arcturus Black,” he responded coldly, ignoring the widening of eyes around him, including some of the other students that had been leaning over to listen.

“I thought Lord Black had only one daughter,” Tawny Wilkins, a tall, thin girl with long, straight brown hair posed thoughtfully. “Lucretia Black, right? She died in 1982, yes?”

Alioth noted the intelligence in her eyes and was thankful that he wouldn’t be entirely surrounded by inbred louts. “That’s right,” he admitted. “Of course, my nephew, Sirius Black, was supposed to be the next heir, but he proved to be unsuitable when he ran off to live with the Potters,” he sneered the name slightly, “when he was sixteen. When Regulus showed signs of being equally unsuitable, my father decided that a bit of insurance would be best.”

“So, you’re the Heir Black?” one of the prefects that had been listening inquired eagerly, no doubt thinking about writing his parents with this information as soon as possible. The fact that no one had ever heard of Alioth Black before would make it obvious that he’d been deliberately kept a secret and secrets were currency among the Dark purebloods.

“I am,” Alioth said in a tone that dared him to suggest otherwise.

“So, why haven’t we met you before?” Sebastian Carrow pressed, rather dimly.
Alioth gave him a mild glare in return and answered coldly, “My father prefers the solitude of Castle Black to the fickle attentions of society.”

When Sebastian opened his mouth again, Hamilton Burke, a pretty boy with honey-colored curls and eyes best described as beige, elbowed him in the ribs and his mouth went closed again.

Alioth just gave Burke a cool smile and they all turned their attentions to their meals. Further conversation was between those already acquainted and no one addressed Alioth again.
This chapter is somewhat piecemeal, but I had no desire to drag it out longer than necessary. As long as you've got a decent grasp on the events of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's (Philosopher's) Stone, you'll have no trouble following the events.

Alioth watched curiously as students were sorted for the year that should have been his. He remembered them all with various mixed feelings. None of them were particularly strong after all this time. Some had died during the war. His friends had drifted apart from him either during or after. None of them had been able to handle his decision to use Black Magic to kill Voldemort in the end.

"Potter, Harry!"

Alioth’s eyes snapped up to the front of the room. His reaction wouldn’t be remarked because pretty much everyone else in the room had done the same. Harry Potter was missing, presumed dead. He had been for years now. The Ministry had launched a search that had lasted more than a year before finally pulling back their resources, admitting defeat. There was a publicly donated hundred thousand galleon reward for information leading to his recovery, but there had been nothing about anyone finding him.

Of course, there hadn’t been, as that was impossible because Alioth was sure he’d have known if he’d been uncovered for who he truly was. But, no. There was most definitely a boy moving to sit down on the stool now. A boy with messy black hair and emerald green eyes and a lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

Alioth’s gaze moved beyond the boy to the twinkly-eyed old pretender smiling benignly at all the gaping students. This had to be Dumbledore’s doing. Alioth had known the man was a manipulator, but had he actually kidnapped some kid and turned him into Harry Potter? Did the kid even know of the deception or had the old man adjusted his memory until he honestly believed it?

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Dear Gods, Alioth could only watch with horror as a little boy who was not Harry Potter hurried nervously toward the wildly cheering House of Lions. Fred and George were even doing their “we got Potter” chant. This couldn’t be happening. There was no way that boy would survive as Harry Potter. Literally. It would be amazing if he survived one year, but there was no way he’d live through the basilisk. Alioth had only survived the first time around through a combination of a massive magical core and having Destiny on his side. This boy had none of that because he wasn’t actually Harry Potter.

Alioth turned his gaze down to his meal, ignoring the jeering around him as the Slytherins discussed the miraculous reappearance of the Boy-Who-Lived. Albus was mad. If Dumbledore couldn’t sacrifice one innocent boy to the cause he would simply find another, it seemed. Well,
not while Alioth was around.

His eyes narrowed at his meal while his mind flew. He’d removed himself from the chess board when he’d changed his identity. Now that Dumbledore had done this, Alioth was putting himself back in the game. Albus thought he was playing against the not yet resurrected Dark Lord, but he was wrong. Alioth had just placed himself across the board.

*Let the games begin,* he thought with a mental smirk.

Alioth could only shake his head in disbelief as Not Harry followed the path he was set upon so seamlessly. He’d become friends with Ron on the train, it seemed, and the two were almost inseparable already. He’d immediately assumed a stance against the Slytherins, no doubt thanks to Ron’s influence. Well, Ron and Hagrid. And Malfoy and Severus, really. Damn, Albus really had the deck stacked against him, didn’t he?

Well, there was one Slytherin who wasn’t going to play along.

He started the first week. It was nearly time for class and Not Harry and Ron were several corridors away from the Transfiguration room looking entirely lost and not a little panicked.

“Where are you two heading?” Alioth asked with a polite smile.

Not Harry instinctively relaxed at the appearance of someone who seemed willing to help. Ron took one look at his Slytherin badge and sneered, “We don’t need any help from you!”

“Really?” Alioth asked politely while Not Harry looked unsure of whether he should be backing his new friend or acknowledging the fact that said friend was being completely rude without provocation. Alioth focused on Not Harry, “Where are you heading?”

Not Harry swallowed nervously and deliberately didn’t look at Ron, “Um. Transfiguration.”

Alioth smiled and pointed down the hall, “Take two lefts and then the second right and you’ll see the classroom fourth door on the right.”

“Thank you!” Not Harry said swiftly, taking off running in that direction.

Ron glared at Alioth for a moment before running after the other boy, yelling about slimy snakes and lies and ambushes. He sounded rather mad, really. Happily, Not Harry seemed to be ignoring the “advice”.

According to the Marauder’s Map, which Alioth had collected from Filch’s office first year, before the twins even got to Hogwarts, Not Harry’s name really was Harry Potter, which wasn’t too surprising. Albus was undoubtedly clever enough to ensure a simple identification spell wouldn’t expose his lies. It required an illegal, minor blood ritual to alter one’s identity in that way, but that was certainly not beyond the old coot. Still, the map was handy in keeping an eye on the boy, for no matter how similar Albus had made them to be, Not Harry was not exactly the same and often reacted to situations differently than Alioth himself would have done.

The first weekend, Alioth found Not Harry and Ron with wands drawn on Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were likewise pointing wands at them in the middle of a corridor. It was the beginning of the lunch hour and the corridor was otherwise vacant, thankfully.

“What is going on here?” Alioth drawled coolly as he approached the scene.
Malfy immediately perked up, clearly expecting a fellow Slytherin to take his side. “Potthead and Weasel were about to attack me!” he exclaimed.

Alioth lifted an unimpressed eyebrow, “You aspire to politics, don’t you, Malfoy?” he inquired smoothly, fighting down the urge to twitch when he felt the always intoxicating swell of Severus’ magic approaching behind him.

“Of course,” Malfoy came back as though he couldn’t imagine why anyone would aspire to anything else. Or perhaps he merely felt that anything less was for plebeians.

“You would do well, then, to work on your ability to lie convincingly. That was pathetic and you cannot count on always having allies at hand. Now, I suggest that you three get on toward lunch.”

Malfy glared at Alioth like he was a traitor, but turned and stormed off with his lackeys in tow.

Alioth just shook his head sadly after the pampered daddy’s boy. He was going to be hit hard when he encountered the real world, just like he’d been in Alioth’s original time.

“We didn’t need to be rescued by you!” Ron spat immediately.

“Of course, you didn’t, Weasley,” Alioth frowned. “You’re proficient in what, now? Two spells between you? If you’re lucky? I promise you that Malfoy was learning to cast years ago. He would have annihilated you in a duel.”

Both boys blushed darkly at that.

“You need to stop being so blindly prejudiced, Weasley,” Alioth said flatly.

“Prejudiced!? ME?!” the redhead sputtered. Apparently, he’d never been so insulted in his life.

Not Harry looked somewhat embarrassed for his friend.

“All Slytherins are not evil, Potter. You’d do well to remember that. We’re defensive because we’re largely shunned by the rest of the school who blindly follow prejudices like that.”

“But you’re not defensive,” Not Harry astutely observed.

Alioth offered a gentler smile than he would normally allow, “I am heir to an extremely rich and influential house, Potter, and I’m easily the top student in my year every single year. I don’t scare easily. Besides, my father taught me to judge people based on their actions, not the reputation of their social or political caste. Now, my advice to you, Potter? Spend a little more time in the library. By virtue of your name alone, you have a great many enemies. Start learning to protect yourself now or there may not be a later for you.”

Not Harry gulped visibly while Ron bristled. “What is that supposed to mean?!” he demanded. “Are you threatening us?”

Alioth smirked at him, “Hypocrite, Weasley. Look it up. And perhaps bigot, while you’re at it. Now, you’d best hurry on to lunch before it’s over.”

Weasley opened his mouth again, but Not Harry thankfully shut him up by grabbing his sleeve and dragging him toward the Great Hall.

“Championing Gryffindors, now, Black?” the cool, dark drawl came from behind him as soon as Not Harry and Ron were around the corner.
Alioth turned with a polite smile. Gods, Severus looked delicious. As he always did. It was a constant effort to control his adolescent body around that man, but he knew that Severus wouldn’t even consider touching him until he was at least sixteen. Thank Circe he’d used the extra growth potion or he’d only be eleven right now. “Just trying to prevent unnecessary deaths, professor,” Alioth answered smoothly. Severus had always rather favored Alioth. Ever since first year when he’d proved to be both extremely intelligent and the ideal Slytherin.

Severus lifted a sardonic eyebrow in return but his eyes danced with mirth. “You’re likely the only one of my students who would seek to do such a thing where Potter is concerned.”

Alioth cracked a small grin at that. “The Potter kid’s not that bad. A bit naïve and too timid for his own good, but he’s not nearly the prejudiced wanker that Weasley is. The way I see it, why enforce the lies they’re telling him about us?”

“To what end?” Severus asked with little apparent care though Alioth was sure he was more than a little invested in anything to do with the boy he’d Vowed to protect.

“If that boy lives long enough to turn seventeen, he’s going to be a political powerhouse whether he likes it or not,” Alioth reasoned. He knew well enough what had happened in his own life. “There is no sense in making him hate us, even if we will never be friends.” There, that sounded suitably non-alarming, right?

Severus huffed quietly, “You would be the voice of reason even where Potter is concerned, wouldn’t you, Black?”

“I wouldn’t know how to be anything else, Professor,” Alioth smiled wryly.

Not Harry, despite being incredibly similar to what Alioth had once been, bore definite differences. An excellent example was the first flying lesson. Where Alioth had jumped on a broom he didn’t know how to ride and raced Malfoy off into the sky, risking expulsion, Not Harry had reacted impulsively in another way. He’d actually tackled the pureblood boy off his broom and snatched away Neville’s Remembrall while Draco was trying to recover from the shock of being physically attacked – though it hadn’t gotten him onto the Quidditch team. It made Alioth wonder if Not Harry had been a brawler before Dumbledore reprogrammed him. Maybe he’d been in a muggle orphanage, one of the many muggleborns that didn’t make it to Hogwarts every year.

It was a little known fact that Hogwarts’ scholarship fund for those who couldn’t afford the school only went so far. Impoverished purebloods like the Weasleys got first draw, then halfbloods, and the muggleborns with muggleborn orphans falling to the very bottom. If there wasn’t enough scholarship money that year, they never received a letter. There was a good chance that Not Harry was only at Hogwarts because he was using the tuition James and Lily had put forward for their son a decade ago. Not that that made it okay for Dumbledore to rewrite some poor kid’s entire personality, and Alioth no longer doubted that that was what had happened. He’d seen enough of Not Harry to be certain that he honestly believed he was Harry Potter. Being a legilimens was incredibly handy, especially when no one would ever guess that you were.

On All Hallows’ Eve, Alioth made a point to be late to the Feast. He settled into the library a few hours early and surreptitiously watched on the Marauder’s Map as Quirinus Quirrell/Tom Riddle escorted Blith into the school and set him loose on the second floor before running to the Great Hall to doubtlessly make his dramatic announcement that the troll was in the dungeons. No doubt he was planning that the distraction would last longer if the professors were looking for the troll in the wrong place.
It was slightly amazing that Hermione was actually in the girl’s bathroom and Ron and Not Harry were even now breaking off from the rest of the Gryffindors to look for her. You’d think that more would change considering that Not Harry was… well, *not* Harry, but then Ron was still Ron and he was really the one responsible for Hermione being in the bathroom. And there weren’t that many options available to help her being that the teachers ditched the students remarkably quickly, not sending even a single chaperone with each group that they could have told. And it really hadn’t seemed that dangerous at the time. The troll was, after all, supposed to be in the dungeons, not the second floor.

Folding up the map, he tucked it away before setting out to intercept three clueless first years about to face a troll. The library was on the third floor and Alioth made a point to take a route that would make it seem he was heading for the Great Hall, assuming he knew nothing of what was happening. He didn’t expect to run into a flustered-looking Quirrell in one of the secret passages.

“Professor,” he nodded respectfully with a slight smile. He was one of the only students in the school to unfailingly treat the stuttering professor with nothing but respect. Not that he really cared about Quirrell, but it would be counterproductive to annoy his companion.

Quirrell just met his eyes for a moment before shoving passed him in his hurry toward the third floor corridor.

Alioth continued on at a quick pace, being careful to ensure that he appeared entirely calm. It wouldn’t do to have the portraits report anything untoward, after all. He heard Hermione scream as he neared and immediately drew his wand and broke into a run. He rounded the last corner to find the scene a bit different than he remembered, not that that was surprising. The three children were in the corridor rather than the bathroom. The troll, terrifyingly massive compared to the kids, was swinging his club at Not Harry and the boy dove but not far enough.

Alioth snapped off a quick *expelliarmus*, sending the club flying, ricocheting off the ceiling, wall, floor, then the opposite wall before it settled. “Oi!” he hollered at the troll, which was trying to figure out what had happened to its club. “Pick on someone your own size, you brute!”

It worked. The troll spun to face him, letting out a stone shaking roar of fury while the children scurried further down the hall, though they stayed to watch. Bloody Gryffindors. Probably of the impression that they could help if Alioth needed it – though Ron may have suspected Alioth of working with the troll or something sordid like that.

With a grunt of exertion, the troll lowered its upper body and charged at Alioth.

Being careful to keep his spells both Light and at OWL level or below, Alioth used a quick levitation charm to maneuver a handy statue in between its pumping legs at just the right moment to send it into an uncontrolled dive. It was far too close to him to hope to stop it at that point, and he’d prefer not to show off his massive magical core by putting up a strong enough shield charm to impede the beast. Instead, he just watched its trajectory and stepped forward at the right moment, ducking down under one of its flailing arms as it careened through the corridor right next to him.

He spun around quickly and levitated the statue again, taking aim as the troll settled from that painful fall. Without giving it a chance to reorient, he used a powerful banishing charm to throw the statue directly into the troll’s relatively small head with the speed of a bludger. There was a deafening crack of breaking stone and bone alike, and then everything settled and silence reigned for several long seconds before an awed voice gasped out, “That was completely wicked!”

With a chuckle of surprised amusement, Alioth turned from the increasingly gruesome sight of a troll with a misshapen head in a growing puddle of dark blood to the grinning face of Not Harry, looking at him with what Alioth suspected was blossoming hero worship. He certainly hoped it
was. That would be ideal for his plans.

Ron looked like he’d have loved to say the same thing if not for years of conditioning against Slytherins preventing him from complimenting one.

Hermione just looked terribly shaken, though she seemed to be consciously working to calm herself down. She was leaning against the wall with one arm, the other wrapped around her middle, eyes closed and taking slow, deep breaths.

“Are you okay, Granger?” Alioth asked gently.

She nodded shakily and her voice came out with only a small tremor, “Yes, I will be. Thank you for your help, Black.”

“How’d you know we were here?” asked Ron suspiciously.

“I didn’t,” Alioth lied smoothly.

Before anyone could say more, there was a loud gasp and a muttered Scottish curse from the other end of the hall. Alioth turned to see McGonagall, Quirrell, and Severus staring at the scene with varying degrees of disbelief. Then Quirrell let out a moan and sagged against the wall in faux distress. Severus’ eyes narrowed and flicked a few times between Alioth and Not Harry before settling on his student. McGonagall stalked toward them like an angry lion.

“What were you thinking!?” she demanded of all four of them. “You’re lucky you weren’t killed! Why aren’t you in your dormitories!?”

While the firsties looked at each other nervously, Alioth lifted a cool eyebrow at the Gryffindor Head of House. “I wasn’t aware we were meant to be,” he explained simply. “I was in the library. I lost track of time and was just heading down to the Great Hall now when I heard Granger scream. I found the troll attacking them and intervened.” Though he desperately wanted to say something sly about being yelled at for defending her students and how he could have left them to die, he restrained himself. The hot-headed Gryffindor that he’d been in his last life was no more. That child had died during the war. He was an adult now and perfectly capable of holding his tongue. He was not about to suffer point deduction or get a detention just to level a satisfying accusation.

The way Severus lifted an eyebrow at him told Alioth that his Head of House suspected his thoughts on the matter and was amused. He was probably thinking the same thing. Minerva, like her students, tended to speak before thinking.

Before McGonagall could comment on Alioth’s explanation, the Gryffindors spoke up.

“They were looking for me, Professor,” Granger lied, just as she had in Alioth’s original time.

“Miss Granger!” McGonagall gasped, clearly horrified to think it could be her favorite first year’s fault.

“I went looking for the troll. I thought I could take it on my own. You know, because I’ve read all about them,” the silly Gryffindor rambled.

Alioth looked away to prevent himself from rolling his eyes. He could not imagine why she thought the lie would help anything. Whether the boys were attempting to save her from her own stupidity or her own ignorance shouldn’t affect them at all, so the only thing accomplished by her lie was that she made herself seem reckless rather than weak, and he was certain that that hadn’t
been her intention. Well, perhaps Ron would have gotten in trouble for being the cause of her crying in the bathroom, but she could have very easily claimed that she’d been crying because she was homesick. Bloody Gryffindors.

He hadn’t realized that when he’d been in Not Harry’s position. He’d just seen her lying to a teacher and been incredibly flattered. He hadn’t been quite logical enough to realize how pointless the lie had been.

“They followed to try to stop me,” Hermione went on bravely, “but it was too big and too fast and we didn’t know what to do. If Black hadn’t found us, we’d probably be dead. He disarmed it and then he distracted it away from us and when it charged at him he tripped it with that statue and then when it fell down, he hit it over the head with the statue. It all happened so fast, there really wasn’t time to fetch a professor.’’

“I see,” McGonagall frowned heavily, her lips pressed into a tight, disapproving line. “In that case… Hermione Granger, you foolish girl! How could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?”

Hermione hung her head as though she was ashamed while Not Harry and Ron looked at her in awe.

Alioth fought the urge to sigh. He knew that he hadn’t been any better at that age, and it was continually amazing to him that he had survived his childhood at all. There was no doubt that Severus and Quirrell both knew that she was lying. Her acting was passable but the boys completely ruined it with their lack of poker faces. Any competent Slytherin could have deduced as much.

“Miss Granger, ten points will be taken from Gryffindor for this. I’m very disappointed in you,” said McGonagall and Severus glared at her back. Ten points for risking her life against direct orders from the professors and endangering two of her classmates? Really? “If you’re not hurt at all, you’d best head to Gryffindor Tower. Your housemates are no doubt worried about you,” she went on.

Once Hermione had edged around the dead troll toward the stairs, Minerva turned her attention to the other Gryffindors. “As for the two of you,” they both cringed on cue. “Going after Miss Granger was not the smartest choice you could have made, but your intentions were good. Five points to Gryffindor for each of you for trying to help a fellow student.”

Alioth’s brow rose slightly. So, essentially, she’d taken no points from her house over this fiasco. How the hell did she expect the kids to learn that risking their lives over something like this wasn’t the ideal thing to do? He’d certainly never learned that the first time around.

“And Mr. Black,” McGonagall said at last, turning to face him. “You risked your life today to protect three young students not of your House. For that, I award fifty points to Slytherin.”

Severus’ lips twitched slightly in pleasure at that.

“Thank you, Professor,” Alioth acknowledged gravely, paying respect to the seriousness of the situation.

“Now, you should all return to your common rooms…”

“I’ll escort Mr. Black,” Severus spoke up.

Not a word passed between the Slytherins until they were closed into Severus’ office. He cast an
anti-eavesdropping ward at the door, then focused on Alioth. “What really happened, Mr. Black?” he demanded at once.

“I heard a rumor earlier today that Granger was holed up in one of the bathrooms crying most of the day. I would assume that Potter and Weasley heard the same rumor and decided to collect her themselves when they heard she may be in danger. Personally, what I told Professor McGonagall was the truth. I was on my way to the Great Hall when I heard her scream. I came upon them just as the troll was about to bring its club down on Potter. He tried to dive out of the way but I doubt he’d have made it. I cast an expelliarmus at it, then yelled to gain its attention. When it turned and charged me, I levitated the statue between its legs. It tripped and I banished the statue into its head before it could reorient.”

“Very impressive, Mr. Black,” Severus noted after a moment, but there was suspicion beneath his tone.

“My father has already lost several heirs, Professor Snape,” Alioth explained quietly. “He did not wish to take that chance with me. I have been trained in dueling, defense, and even martial combat for most of my life.”

Something flashed in Severus’ eyes that might have been intrigue, but it was very quickly buried beneath mild disdain, “Yet it would seem that he neglected to teach you prudence. Are you so confident of your ability that you would throw yourself unnecessarily into danger? To protect three brainless Gryffindors?” He was letting out some of his frustration now, though Alioth was virtually certain it wasn’t truly directed at him. He knew that Severus would have been upset if something had happened to him and no matter how much he hated the very idea of Harry Potter, he would have been devastated if the boy had died. He was just venting now.

“Stupid kids, yes, sir, especially with regard to Weasley, but they are just kids,” Alioth reasoned.

“You are just a kid, Black!” Severus snapped.

“I’ve been trained, Professor,” Alioth pointed out gently.

Severus looked away, his jaw clenched, clearly battling his emotions. After a long moment of silence, he took a visible breath and waved his wand to dispel the ward. “Go to the common room,” he said curtly.

“Yes, sir,” Alioth said quietly, the two small syllables coming out with more warmth and affection than he’d intended.

Severus turned sharply to look at him, but Alioth had already turned and made a quick exit.

Merlin, Alioth internally groaned once he was out of the office and striding briskly down the corridor. He was going to have wet dreams tonight. He seemed to every time he was near Severus very much. An unfortunate byproduct of teenage hormones and no sex life being confronted with the love of his life – both lives.

He spent the walk back to the common room trying to decide if he could stop his body from producing such raging hormones without adversely affecting anything. It wasn’t like his body was developing, after all. He was dead, though his body did mimic normal body chemistry and function. He supposed it would be possible, but he’d have to alter his growth potions again so that they supplied the necessary developmental hormones when he aged himself one month’s growth each month in order to keep up with his yearmates.
Maybe then he’d be able to stop fighting erections every time he was anywhere near Severus. It would make potion classes much less stressful.

To his displeasure but absolutely no surprise, Alioth caught Not Harry, Ron, and Hermione scouring the library for information about Nicholas Flamel before Yule. Alioth had continued to keep an eye on Not Harry all year and he’d helped him out of several more situations with Malfoy or other Slytherins. From the small dips of legilimency he’d utilized, he knew that the boy was coming to trust him. He’d helped them many times and he’d never spoken a mean word against them – even Hermione – or even asked for anything in return. Of course, he was too naïve to imagine that Alioth was trying to get close to him so that he could use him or try to convert him over to the Dark Side. The boy would learn in time. Until then, Alioth was going to take advantage of the child’s naïveté. He was better off being manipulated by Alioth than Dumbledore, after all.

Hermione went home for Yule but Ron remained, as Alioth remembered. Not Harry stayed as well, making Alioth wonder what the boy had waiting for him outside these walls. Had Dumbledore gone all the way and convinced both the boy and the Dursleys that he was Harry and had been living there or was he to spend his summers in an orphanage or something? Well, to be fair, Alioth did not know that the boy didn’t have some kind of caregivers. He could have even had parents before Dumbledore got hold of him. Somehow, though, Alioth did not think that Dumbledore would leave the boy anywhere during the summer that he might actually not loathe. He supposed he’d have to bring the topic up with Not Harry and see what he could glean from his mind.

It was in late January that the expected confrontation with his fellow Slytherins finally came. He’d honestly been expecting it sooner. Apparently, he’d underestimated the wariness of the other snakes.

Probably predictably, it was Malfoy who cast the first metaphorical stone.

“What is your problem, Black?!” he demanded as soon as Alioth walked into the common room. Dinner had ended a little while ago and the common room was fairly full. Everyone quieted to watch the confrontation as the Malfoy heir snarled at the Black heir. No one had dared to mess with Alioth before. He knew that he annoyed the others sometimes, but the combination of his powerful father and the fact that he was basically accepted as a magical and intellectual prodigy had forced them to keep their distance and mind their manners. Of course, Malfoy had never actually been taught that anyone could be a danger to a Malfoy – except perhaps the Dark Lord himself.

“What is your problem, Black?!” he demanded as soon as Alioth walked into the common room. Dinner had ended a little while ago and the common room was fairly full. Everyone quieted to watch the confrontation as the Malfoy heir snarled at the Black heir. No one had dared to mess with Alioth before. He knew that he annoyed the others sometimes, but the combination of his powerful father and the fact that he was basically accepted as a magical and intellectual prodigy had forced them to keep their distance and mind their manners. Of course, Malfoy had never actually been taught that anyone could be a danger to a Malfoy – except perhaps the Dark Lord himself.

“No!” Draco hissed furiously. “You! You walk around here thinking you’re untouchable because your father’s Lord Black and because you’ve got decent marks, but you’re not!”

Alioth smirked slightly at the deliberate understatement with regard to his marks. They weren’t decent. They weren’t even great. They were exceptional at the very least. Yes, he was a complete cheater given the fact that he was a very learned adult in the body of a child but that was hardly the point. “Will there be a point to this?” he asked, his tone as bored as he could make it.

“I’m sick of you sticking up for Potter all the time! It’s disgusting the way you follow him around! Always smiling at him and protecting him like you’re sweet on him! Does your father know you prefer wizards to witches? Does he approve of your fascination with the scarhead?
How does he like the fact that his last chance at an heir is a blood traitor?"

“You would do well to guard your tongue, little Malfoy,” Alioth snapped, his patience abruptly
gone. “You dare to call me a blood traitor?” he snarled, taking a threatening step closer and greatly
enjoying the way Malfoy stumbled a few steps back, his face going rather pale. The Black scion
forcefully calmed himself. Luckily, he had an extremely tight rein on his magic. It would only
take once for it to get loose when Dumbledore was too close and that would be the end of his
charade as just another student. Not only was his magic powerful enough to challenge the Dark
Lord, it was as black as black could be and scented of death as only a necromancer’s magic could
be.

“Allow me to answer your questions, child,” Alioth drawled condescendingly. Malfoy colored but
was still too intimidated to speak up again. “Yes, my father is well aware that I prefer wizards to
witches. He does not have strong feelings with regard to my interaction with the Boy-Who-Lived.
I am not and will never be a blood traitor, little boy. I will never support the fool, Dumbledore. I
will never oppose the Dark.

“Yes, I favor Harry Potter,” he said, now lifting his face and his voice to address the whole room.
He knew that they all had noticed the way he treated Not Harry. He knew that they all wondered
about it and about him and his loyalties as a result. “He is the most famous magical in Britain. He
is adored by the masses, and when he comes of age he will be one of the most politically powerful
people in the country. In all of Europe, even.”

“You’re saying that you’re going to suck up to Potter just because he’ll be powerful when he grows
up?” Petra, a seventh year boy sneered distastefully.

“I’m saying that I’m not going to encourage the boy to hate me. If you all want to damage your
future prospects in order to indulge a petty schoolyard feud, by all means, have at it. Honestly, you
people are supposed to be Slytherins but sometimes you strike me as bearing a much greater
resemblance to the Gryffindors. You have more concern for your pride than self-preservation. I’m
not suggesting to bow at the boy’s feet or even support his beliefs. Just prove to him that
Slytherins can be decent human beings.”

“And what when the Dark Lord returns?” A fifth year, Belladonna Nott, Theodore’s elder sister all
but snarled. “Do you think he will heap blessings upon all of us who have embraced the boy who
defeated him?”

Alioth laughed slightly hysterically. “Do you honestly believe that the Dark Lord was defeated by
an infant? Are you that stupid?” Belladonna colored darkly, but Alioth hadn’t directed the
comment at her alone. He’d shared it around the common room evenly. “The ‘Boy-Who-Lived’
is Light propaganda! Nothing more!” he spat passionately. Some part of him was aware of
Severus’ magic drawing closer but he was too deep in his rant to give it much thought.
“Dumbledore orchestrated the events of that night. He set up the Potters to fall, to serve as
sacrifices to power an ancient blood magic ritual.”

“How do you know this?” Belladonna demanded.

“Because it makes sense!” he snapped. “A damned lot more sense than an infant miraculously
defeating a Dark Lord! The Black Family library is one of the best in the world. The ritual exists.
The Potters probably even used it willingly, but Alioth hadn’t directed the
comment at her alone. He’d shared it around the common room evenly. “The ‘Boy-Who-Lived’
is Light propaganda! Nothing more!” he spat passionately. Some part of him was aware of
Severus’ magic drawing closer but he was too deep in his rant to give it much thought.
“Dumbledore orchestrated the events of that night. He set up the Potters to fall, to serve as
sacrifices to power an ancient blood magic ritual.”

“How do you know this?” Belladonna demanded.

“Because it makes sense!” he snapped. “A damned lot more sense than an infant miraculously
defeating a Dark Lord! The Black Family library is one of the best in the world. The ritual exists.
The Potters probably even used it willingly, thinking it merely a precaution. Through a blood
ritual, the caster promises his or her life in service of another. Originally, it was created to protect
kings and lords. Once the ritual takes place, it is permanent. From then on, if the caster or casters
are killed, the subject gains a powerful protection against the killer. So when the Dark Lord killed
first James and then Lily, he inadvertently emplaced the protection that defeated him. It was a
trap. Dumbledore lured him there, tricking him into destroying himself.”

There was a moment of silence before Felix Vaisey spoke up, “How do you know it was a trap? Could have just been the Potters.”

“A number of my relatives were in service to the Dark Lord at the end. I won’t go into details, but I will tell you that Dumbledore had let slip something that made the Dark Lord target the Potters specifically.

“Now, I’ve had enough of playing professor for one evening. You all treat Potter as you will, but don’t judge me for how I choose to treat him.” He turned to look at Draco again, “Accuse me of being a blood traitor again, little Malfoy, and you may just find yourself incapable of continuing your family line,” he threatened coldly, causing the boy to blanch once more and instinctively turn sideways and move his hands to protect his crotch.

Alioth knew that the confrontation with Quirrell when he went after the Stone was approaching swiftly, and from everything he’d observed, it seemed like it was likely to play out very much as it had when he was young. He actually suspected foul play. Dumbledore had to be manipulating people to make sure it worked out right. He wasn’t sure if Not Harry was being directly manipulated via perhaps compulsions or if it was maybe Ron and Hermione who were being controlled or firmly nudged in the right direction. Regardless of where the fault may lie, however, the events were playing out mostly as Alioth remembered.

He was prepared to intervene to stop the kids from going down, and so was sitting in the library with the Map spread before him. He watched them go to McGonagall and get turned away. He watched Severus intercept them and send them outside. When curfew approached, Alioth was getting ready to go down to his dorm and wait for them to strike out to be heroes.

So, he was rather surprised when the trio took a detour and made for the library. He folded the map away when it became clear they were headed for him, pulling forward a book and opening it randomly just before they rounded the nearest bookcase.

“All right, Not Harry greeted cautiously while Ron hung back looking disapproving and Hermione just fidgeted nervously.

“Yes, Harry?” They’d never met like this before. Though Not Harry liked him – from what Alioth had gleaned from his mind – the boy had never before sought him out. Their only real contact had been the numerous times Alioth had chased away troublesome Slytherins or otherwise helped the boy out of trouble. He pushed his book aside to give the boy his full attention.

“Um… I don’t know if you’re really going to care about this, but I’ve tried to tell my Head of House and she won’t listen and Professor Dumbledore is gone, and I really have no idea what else to do…”

“Slow down,” Alioth implored gently, pulling out the chair next to him and gesturing for Not Harry to join him. He waited until the nervous boy took the offered seat to ask, “What’s going on?”

“Um… Okay. So, when I was getting my school supplies, Hagrid took me to Gringotts because he had to pick up something really important and bring it to Hogwarts for Professor Dumbledore…” Not Harry went on to explain his thought processes and how they’d gone about figuring out that the Stone was in the school, hidden down the forbidden third floor corridor, and that someone – Snape, Ron insisted, though Not Harry stressed maybe, obviously expecting Alioth to defend his
Head of House – someone was trying to steal the Stone and they were going to go tonight while Dumbledore was gone, and no one would listen, and if Voldemort got that Stone, then he was going to come back and he was going to start killing people again and he was going to try to kill Harry because he’d tried and failed before…

“Okay, okay. Calm down. Take a breath,” Alioth interrupted when Not Harry rambled out an exceedingly long run-on sentence without pausing to breathe. “Why did you come to me?” he asked gently.

Not Harry blushed and looked away before mumbling, “You killed that troll so easily, I thought, maybe, you might be able to help us.”

Alioth looked at the boy in slight disbelief and weighed his options. He really shouldn’t let the boy go at all. He was far too young, even if he seemed slightly more studious than Alioth had been as a child – possibly due to Alioth’s warning about it saving his life. There were benefits to bringing the kid along, of course. For one, it would be an excellent alibi. Dumbledore may not be so quick to assume pure motives of a Slytherin, but with Not Harry there to corroborate… And really, it wasn’t like Alioth wasn’t capable of protecting the boy.

The problem would be in explaining why he’d let an eleven-year-old boy accompany him. Hell, he was going to have to explain why he’d involved himself at all. He could just tell Severus and he knew that the man would do everything in his power to stop Quirrell. Of course, that would put Severus in danger and Alioth was completely unwilling to allow that to happen. He wasn’t sending Severus down into that room with Voldemort regardless of how weak the Dark Lord may be at the moment.

So, that left him with the options of going himself, going with Not Harry, or preventing the kids from going down whilst ignoring the problem himself. It’s not like he was particularly bothered with the idea of Voldemort getting the Stone. In fact, it would be a good thing. He was pretty sure the Elixir of Life would be powerful enough to cure the insanity that had begun with the horcruxes and festered while he was without a body. A sane Dark Lord was infinitely preferable to a crazy one.

The problem was that if he brushed Not Harry off when it came to this – particularly if he prevented the boy from trying to stop Voldemort and then the Dark Lord actually succeeded… Not Harry would never forgive him. The boy had taken a huge leap of faith in coming to him with this, given that he was a Slytherin and doubtlessly suspected of being a supporter of Voldemort. All of his progress would be completely lost if he denied the boy now.

It would be damaging, but less so, if he went down without Not Harry.

But how the hell was he going to explain to Dumbledore the thought process that led him to letting a first year accompany him down there? Worse, how would he explain it to Severus, because he knew the man would verbally flay him alive for this, even more so if he endangered Not Harry.

Finally, he nodded gravely. “I’ll take care of it. You have my word.”

“No,” Not Harry protested immediately. “I’m not letting you go alone! I’m going with you!”

“No way,” Alioth said firmly. “Harry, you are a smart kid, but you’re only a first year. I’ve been extensively trained in all forms of combat since I was able to walk. Honestly, you would only slow me down and put me in more danger as I tried to watch out for you.”

“You probably want to go alone so you can help him,” Ron snarled quietly, though not quietly
enough to keep the comment private.

Alioth spared him a cold look, but otherwise ignored the boy as he’d taken to doing after the first few lectures had met a brick wall of bigotry and hypocrisy and bounced right off.

“I have to go!” Not Harry practically begged and Alioth’s eyes sharpened, staring into the artificially bottle-green eyes and pushing ever so gently through them into the mind beyond. The boy was in a minor panic at the concept of being forbidden to go down there. It had to be some form of compulsion magic. The question was, had Voldemort planned for the Boy-Who-Lived to join him down there or had Dumbledore been testing his false child of prophecy.

Alioth sighed. “Very well,” he said with some reluctance, though most of it was affected. “But you will stay behind me and do exactly as I say. I really don’t need to be publically lynched for letting you die.”

Not Harry smiled with profound relief.

“You two go back to your common room,” Alioth commanded the others.

“No way!” Ron almost shouted, earning him a harsh shushing from Hermione – they were in the library, after all. “No way,” Ron repeated more quietly but no less nastily. “You’ll probably kill him down there and blame it on Snape! There’s no way you’re going down there alone with him!”

“You see?” Alioth asked Not Harry wryly.

Not Harry sighed irritably, “Leave it, Ron! He’s not going to take all of us and he probably knows more magic than the three of us together, anyway.”

“Then let him go alone!” Hermione hissed.

Alioth leaned back in his seat and watched with half-lidded eyes as Not Harry argued with his friends. It was a long and rather boring argument with a lot of redundant restatement of Alioth’s lack of trustworthiness and the probability that he was on Snape’s side, but Not Harry eventually won with sheer obstinacy. It was clear, in the end, that nothing was going to change his mind and that he would sooner permanently disassociate himself with the both of them than let them change his mind. They groaned and they grumbled, but they reluctantly agreed.

They were, of course, lying about their agreement while secretly planning to follow Not Harry down to protect him from the possibly dangerous Slytherin. Alioth wasn’t concerned, however.

“Wonderful,” Alioth said blandly. “Fetch your invisibility cloak and meet me at the forbidden corridor in twenty minutes.”

“How… How do you know about my cloak?” Not Harry gaped.

Alioth lifted a vaguely amused eyebrow at the boy, “I pay attention. Now, hurry. If you’re not there in twenty minutes or if you do not arrive alone, I will be going down without you.”

Not Harry nodded decisively and set off at a run, ignoring the hissing of Madam Pince about not running in the library. Ron and Hermione followed, both trying to object to his course of action. Hermione was trying to get him to let Alioth go alone and Ron was trying to convince him that the evil Slytherin was going to murder him once they were all alone down there.

Alioth sighed slightly as he rose and started a leisurely trek toward the corridor, merely shrinking his bag and tucking it into his pocket rather than running back to his dorm to stow it. He spent the
walk considering what, exactly, he was going to do and how he was going to rationalize his actions to Dumbledore and Severus after the fact.

Not Harry arrived a few minutes early. He was wearing the cloak, but he was also breathing heavily and his steps were loud and clumsy, making it virtually useless.

“Stand over there,” Alioth instructed, gesturing toward the corner near the door. He then drew his wand and traced out a powerful, though short-term ward across the corridor.

“What are you doing?” Not Harry hissed quietly.

“Ensuring that your little ‘friends’ do not attempt to follow us,” he explained simply. If it had the unforeseen side effect of slowing down Dumbledore’s gallant rescue, well he certainly couldn’t be blamed for such a thing, having not expected anyone coming down after them. And it would slow the old man down considerably. The ward was exclusive to the Black family. It could only be used by those of their blood and it was very difficult to subvert if you were not also family.

Of course, they should have at least half an hour more than he’d had when he’d done this originally simply because he wasn’t waiting so long to go down. According to the Map, Quirrell had only gone down minutes ahead of them.

“It’s that easy?” Not Harry blinked as he lowered the hood on the cloak. “Then why didn’t Dumbledore do something like that in the first place so kids weren’t wandering down here and getting eaten by a Cerberus?”

Alioth smirked, “That is the question.”


Alioth lifted an eyebrow at the astute observation. He hadn’t realized the boy had retained so much capacity for independent thought. “I have my suspicions.”

“What are they?” Not Harry demanded.

“Later,” Alioth countered. “This corridor isn’t private enough to discuss such things. Now, are you coming with me, or shall I continue alone?”

“I’m coming,” Not Harry said with determination.

Alioth just gave a polite nod and moved toward the door. “Put up your hood.” The boy complied, vanishing from sight, and Alioth opened the door slowly, relaxing when he heard the harp was still playing itself. He crept into the room and closed the door when he’d heard the soft steps of his young companion. He opened the trap door and sent a trio of flare spells down inside. Like a muggle flare, they were simply small lights that burned brightly for a few minutes before dying out. He saw the Devil’s Snare draw away from them, leaving a clear space to land.

“Come here, Harry,” he beckoned the invisible boy. “We’re going to jump down and I’m going to control our landing, okay. Put your arms around my waist and hold tightly.”

The boy obeyed the command as he’d promised and without questions. Alioth put his free arm around Not Harry and once he was sure that the hold was secure, he stepped them both off the edge. Not Harry’s arms tightened almost painfully around him as they plummeted several stories down. A flick of his wand and a murmured, “arresto momentum,” and they were coming to a swift, but comfortable landing on the stone floor.
Not Harry was trembling slightly as he let go, but Alioth didn’t think it was fear when he heard the boy whisper, “Wicked.”

He chuckled quietly in response. It seemed Not Harry was an adrenaline junky as well. He wondered if that was a natural inclination or more of Dumbledore’s meddling. Not Harry, he’d learned, did have an above average magical core. Considerably above average, actually. Alioth suspected that that might have been what had made this particular boy the lucky winner of the involuntary Harry Potter Impersonator role. Between memory charms and permanent human transfiguration – both of which Dumbledore excelled at – this boy could have been just about anyone. There was no guarantee that he’d even been British, actually.

In the next room, Alioth removed a spare bit of parchment from his pocket.

“What are you doing?” Not Harry whispered curiously.

“The key for that door,” he nodded toward the door to go on, “is up there amongst that flock of keys. They are charmed so that they cannot simply be summoned. The presence of brooms by the wall there suggests that anyone wishing to go on is meant to fly up there and fetch the correct key. Personally, I’d rather not. An important thing to remember about trials such as this is that they are designed to make it nearly impossible for the interloper to succeed – or at least, they should be designed that way. For that reason, trying to pass them in the way intended is the last thing you want to do.

“Thus I am transfiguring this parchment into a servant who can fly up there and fetch it for me.” Not that he minded flying. These were just not the circumstances in which he preferred to do it. Those brooms were abysmal, for a start. He also remembered the other keys attacking him once he’d grabbed the correct one.

While he was explaining, he transfigured the parchment into an undersized falcon – undersized so that it could more easily navigate the room to hunt the key.

“Let’s wait over here,” Alioth suggested, moving toward the door once he’d released his hunter.

“Will I learn all these spells by fourth year?” Not Harry asked as they both watched the falcon swoop about the room chasing the proper key.

“No,” Alioth chuckled. “Not in your classes, at least. My father has had me training with an assortment of tutors virtually my entire life. During the summers, my training continues, and I am expected to study diligently during the year on a number of subjects in addition to those of my classes.”

“Why?” Not Harry asked, looking somewhat baffled.

Alioth sobered, “My father is Lord of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, a family that dates back five thousand years. We are incredibly rich, powerful, and respected. We are also very nearly extinct in the paternal line,” he explained. It was important that Not Harry learned these things for his future. If all went well, Alioth may very well allow the boy to remain the figurehead of the Potter family. “My father is not a young man. He is, in fact, ninety-one-years-old this year.”

“Ninety?” Not Harry gasped.

Alioth gave a small smile to the still invisible boy next to him. “Yes. Ninety-one. In his youth, he had only a daughter before his wife died, but he didn’t consider that a problem because he had a brother and sister and many cousins, so he would merely pass on the family lordship to one of their
“What happened?” Harry whispered, completely taken with the story.

“The first heir was Orion Black, his nephew. When Orion had a son, the heirship was dedicated to the eldest, Sirius Black. Unfortunately, when Sirius was sixteen, he rebelled against his family. Forsook us entirely. And thus the heirship moved on to the younger son, Regulus Black. And then the war picked up. Orion and Regulus were killed within months of each other, and the heirship was reluctantly moved back to Sirius Black. Most of the other cousins had produced daughters, you see, and the few boys were killed in the war or otherwise incapable of taking the title.

“Ah, here we are,” he said as the falcon managed to snatch up the key and tucked itself into a stoop to take it to him. The other keys pursued, but a simple impedimenta shield raised behind the falcon foiled the attempts to impale it.

Reversing his transfiguration, Alioth tucked the parchment back into his pocket and put the key in the lock. They both stepped through into the next room, this one bearing a massive chess set.

“What happened to Sirius?” Not Harry whispered, clearly wishing to hear the rest of the story.

“Sirius Black was a rebel, as I said. A blood traitor, as a matter of fact.” He expected some kind of complaint from Not Harry regarding the term.

Rather than complain, the boy sounded curious when he asked, “What does blood traitor even mean? The Slytherins are always calling me and Ron that.”

“Ron and me,” Alioth absently corrected. He went on as he could practically hear the boy rolling his eyes. “Blood traitor is a term used to refer to those of pure or noble wizarding blood, such as yourself and Weasley, who have chosen to embrace the ways of the muggles and support the welfare of the muggles instead of honoring the magic in their veins and supporting their own culture.”

“But isn’t wizarding culture kind of… outdated?” Not Harry asked curiously.

“Wizards have been living in their own advanced societies for more than twenty thousand years, Harry. Muggles have only begun to build truly advanced societies in the last few hundred. We may seem outdated to you because in the last couple of centuries, blood traitors have been pushing for us to adopt muggle customs and traditions, which we have done slowly.”

Not Harry was silent, probably digesting that information, while Alioth drew his wand and analyzed the chess set. Chess had never been his strong suit. He’d learned to play decently with time, but he rather doubted that he could actually defeat this set fairly. Luckily, of course, he was a wizard and entirely capable of fighting magic with magic.

The enchantment on the game board was powerful, the wards preventing them from going around or over it were strong. Interestingly, the weakness was in the transfigurations themselves. While they would resist being transfigured into something else, they were not charmed to be stronger than the stone from which they were shaped.

With that in mind, Alioth attacked the pieces with a series of blasting curses that soon had them reduced to rubble.

“Wow,” he heard Not Harry mutter.

“We’d best move quickly,” Alioth advised, starting across the board. “These pieces are charmed
to put themselves back together, but it will take a bit.”

“You didn’t finish telling me what happened to Sirius,” Not Harry reminded him once they’d crossed the board.

“I didn’t,” Alioth agreed. “Well, as I said, he forsook the family. He actually moved in with your father and grandparents for his last two school years. After graduating, he joined the auror academy with your father, and was eventually named your godfather when you were born.” They stepped into a room with a troll, so they’d apparently replaced the deceased Blith. This one was merely unconscious, snoring loudly and filling the room with his foul breath.

“He was my godfather?” Not Harry gasped. “I have a godfather? Then why didn’t he take me when my parents died?”

“Because he was sent to Azkaban, the wizarding prison, within two days of your parents’ deaths. He was accused of betraying them to the Dark Lord.”

“But he was their friend!” Not Harry gasped.

“Indeed,” Alioth agreed. He wasn’t going to go out of his way to make Not Harry think fondly of Sirius, even if he could have explained away his knowledge through family members that had served Voldemort. Sirius had been a crappy godfather to him and Not Harry didn’t need to deal with that as well. Not only had Sirius been fairly incapable of separating him from James, he’d abandoned Harry to go after Pettigrew in the first place. Then he’d broken out of prison to go after Pettigrew, again ignoring Harry. And when he’d been a fugitive, he’d always done as Dumbledore told him despite the fact that he had more right over Harry. “You would be wise to learn from your parents’ mistakes, Harry. Just because someone acts like your friend does not mean he is truly trustworthy.”

Flames sprung up behind them as they entered the sixth room.

“With Sirius’ incarceration,” Alioth concluded as he approached the table lined with potions, “the heirship would fall into the maternal line if not for me. Being that I am, rather literally, Father’s last chance for a suitable heir, he has taken great pains to see me trained well so that I would be very difficult to kill.”

Alioth read through the riddle quickly. It was identical to the one from his childhood. He passed it to Not Harry. “Only one of us can go into the last room,” he confided.

Not Harry cursed under his breath, evidently smart enough to figure out that he wasn’t going to be the one to go.

Alioth picked up the proper vial, uncapping it and examining the contents to be extra certain that it was the right one. Poison wouldn’t kill him, of course, but he was rather susceptible to flame… He pushed toward Not Harry the vial that would allow him to go back. “If I end up dueling him, this room might not be very safe,” he advised. “Take this and go back the way we came. Go to the room with the chess set and hide in one of the alcoves behind the board. Wait there until I come and get you or until someone else that you trust shows up.”

Not Harry stared at Alioth grimly. “You didn’t have to come down here with me. Thank you.”

Alioth smiled at the boy, “A Slytherin never does anything without a reason, Harry.”

“So what’s yours?” Not Harry asked cautiously.
“You’re a good kid dealt a bad hand in life,” Alioth said honestly, because being Dumbledore’s chosen pawn was never a good place to be. “I’m in a position to help you now, and I want to. Maybe someday, you’ll be in a position to help me, and I hope that you’ll want to.”

Not Harry nodded pensively, then smiled a bit, “That’s a Slytherin way of saying we’re friends, right?”

Alioth laughed, “Indeed, it is, Harry. Indeed, it is.” He watched as Harry quaffed his potion and disappeared back the way they’d come before downing his own and stepping through the flames into the mirror room.

Quirrell spun around when Alioth stepped into the room, his wand rising, but he cast no spells. “Black?” he asked in bewilderment. “What are you doing here?”

“Bit of a long story,” Alioth admitted.

“Then give me the short version,” the turbaned man demanded.

“Potter and his little lackeys divined that someone meant to steal the Philosopher’s Stone tonight. In a move of, I must admit, some intelligence, they came to me for help instead of coming down here alone to try to stop you. Granted, they were expecting the thief was Severus. Not you.”

“But you’re not surprised,” Quirrell noted.

“Indeed, not,” Alioth smirked. “I’m magically sensitive, and trained well enough to recognize a possession when I feel one.”

“Let me speak to him,” came the frail voice of Lord Voldemort himself.

“My Lord, you’re not strong enough,” Quirrell fretted.

“I’m strong enough for this,” Voldemort said in a tone that suggested his servant needed to stop questioning him.

Quirrell did as commanded, removing the turban as he turned around.

“Lord Voldemort,” Alioth greeted respectfully with a shallow bow.

Red eyes narrowed at him, “Am I not your lord, boy?”

“I am not your enemy, Lord Voldemort,” Alioth offered, “but neither am I your follower. I have a deal for you.”

“Oh?” Voldemort asked, his tone sharp, angry.

“I know how to get the Stone, and I will give it to you in exchange for the ownership of one of your slaves.”

“Who?” Voldemort hissed.

“Severus.”

Voldemort looked slightly perplexed at that. “Why him?”

Alioth smirked a bit, “I’ve fancied him for years now,” he admitted honestly.
The Dark Lord sneered but didn’t seem to doubt the reason despite the fact that he couldn’t possibly be as good at detecting lies in his present position as he would have been his own body. “The Philosopher’s Stone for the ownership of Severus…” he hesitated only a moment before relenting, “It is done.”

Alioth kept his victorious grin internal. He was certain that the only reason Voldemort had agreed so readily was because he had his doubts about Severus’ loyalty after so many years at Dumbledore’s side. Severus was a valuable potions master and dueler, but with his loyalties in question, it was enough to tip the balance of this deal. “It is done,” Alioth agreed, adding his own internal magic to cement the deal.

Voldemort stepped back as Alioth approached the mirror and turned to gaze into it. He was certain that this would work. Dumbledore had charmed the mirror so that the only one who could get the Stone was one who wanted it but did not want to use it. He had literally no use for the stone seeing as the Elixir of Life only worked on the living and he was very much not.

The picture in the mirror shifted to display his Heart’s Desire and he smiled blissfully as he looked upon the most beautiful sight in the world. He, as an adult, sat cuddled against a Severus who looked about thirty, on a thick rug in front of an intimate fire. Severus’ arms were wrapped around him and he leaned forward to press a gentle kiss to Alioth’s neck.

“What do you see?” Voldemort inquired curiously.

“Myself with Severus,” Alioth admitted. He could practically hear the Dark Lord sneering behind him, but he ignored it as the image of himself took a blood red stone from his pocket, held it so Alioth could see, and then tucked it back in and Alioth felt it in his own pocket this time.

Tearing his gaze away from the beatific sight, Alioth removed the Stone from his pocket and offered it to Voldemort. As soon as the Dark Lord took possession of the Stone, Alioth felt a new awareness bloom in the back of his mind. He internally shuddered at the remarkable feeling of his love’s magic inside of him.

“I set a ward in the corridor before the Cerberus,” he offered, reining in his urge to laugh maniacally. “If Dumbledore is back, it will have held him for a time, but it won’t slow passage from this side.”

Voldemort nodded as Quirrell picked up the turban to begin wrapping it again.

“Great! So, any chance you could fire off a few Avada Kedavras so Dumbledore will assume I at least tried to put up a fight?” he asked hopefully.

Without warning, Quirrell spun on him and granted his wish with somewhat more enthusiasm than he’d expected. Within seconds, four of the deadly spell went whizzing by him close enough to have been extremely unnerving had he actually been alive. The Killing Curse had absolutely no effect against an undead creature. A vampire or inferi wouldn’t even feel the spell, and he was in that same category.

So, he just smirked at the frowning professor. “Thanks! Good luck!”

Once Quirrell was out of sight, Alioth sighed and turned back to look into the mirror again. He was sure he’d never tire of looking at that, but he’d much rather continue working toward making it a reality than waste away watching a fantasy.

He turned away from the sight and launched half a dozen spells around the room as though there
had been some great battle here, then made his way back to the chess room. The flames did not ignite and trap him in the potions room again. He assumed that it only worked when you entered the room from the other side. He called to Not Harry quietly when he got into the chess room again and the boy appeared from under his invisibility cloak near one of the dark alcoves.

“H-he got away?” he breathed uneasily.

“It was Quirrell,” Alioth confirmed, working a tremor into his voice for effect, “but not just him. The Dark Lord was possessing him. He... He almost hit me with the Killing Curse more than once.”

Not Harry shuddered slightly, “I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” he almost whispered.

“I’m glad you did,” Alioth corrected firmly and waited until Not Harry met his eyes to go on. “He would have killed you, Harry. I barely managed to slow him down and, despite all my training, I probably only survived because he was in a hurry.”

A very subdued Not Harry accompanied Alioth as they worked their way backward through the gauntlet. Though Alioth knew several ways he could have reached Fluffy’s room without a broom, none of them were OWL level or below and conducive to hauling someone else along, so they just grabbed a pair of brooms from the key room and Alioth led the way up. The harp was still playing, likely started again by Quirrell on his way up, and the trap door had been left open, so it was a simple matter to fly up through the room and into the safety of the corridor.

Dumbledore froze in his attempts to remove the ward when he saw them step off their brooms. Ron and Hermione were there behind the Headmaster looking terribly worried until their eyes fell onto Not Harry and became filled with almost comical relief.

The interrogation was long and arduous. Dumbledore had the audacity to attempt a cautious legilimency probe, despite the fact that virtually all pureblood heirs learned occlumency alongside their letters and numbers. Alioth’s occlumency had stopped it cold, though he’d pretended that he’d not noticed the probe. Many people his age would more than likely have missed it, having not yet developed the necessary mental discipline to notice such nuance.

Not Harry explained how he’d gone to Alioth when he’d been unable to get help from his Head of House and what had happened up until they had parted ways. Alioth then explained what had happened in the mirror room. Or rather, he concocted a convincing story about how he’d been shocked to find that Quirrell was, in fact, possessed by Voldemort. The Dark Lord had forced him in front of the mirror and he didn’t know why, but the Stone had ended up in his pocket and Voldemort had taken it while Alioth was still in shock from the mirror. Then the Dark Lord had tried to kill him with the Killing Curse, but he’d dodged and tried to fight back and then Quirrell had just left, probably in too much of a hurry to worry overmuch about killing him.

Dumbledore, despite a certain amount of skepticism, seemed to buy the story. It was more early than late before Alioth was dismissed to his bed.

Despite the late hour, Alioth was intercepted by a very annoyed Severus Snape before he could reach the Slytherin common room, and that perked up his night considerably. Even a brassed off Severus was better than no Severus, after all.

The professor led them into his office, then lifted his wand to raise a host of security spells around the room before focusing his entire attention on Alioth. “What in Morgana’s name did you think you were doing tonight, Black?” he demanded in that colder than ice tone he used when he’d surpassed anger and rage and only his iron clad control was preventing him from cursing the object
of his anger. “I know that you’ve had some strange obsession with Potter all year, but please explain to me what you’ve gained from this latest bout of lunacy. I truly cannot begin to conjure an explanation that verges on the realm of sane or rational in any context, which vexes me as I have always taken you for a very rational child.”

Alioth frowned slightly at being called a child. He didn’t normally find it annoying considering that he was entirely likely to call people children into their twenties and he appeared a fifteen-year-old, but he didn’t like to hear it coming from Severus. Given the things he desperately wanted to do to the man just seemed very unlikely to become reality so long as Severus thought of him as a child.

He forced himself passed that point and focused on the rest of what the man had said. “Potter was insistent on going,” he said reasonably. “I’d have had to physically restrain him to prevent it.”

“Then that is exactly what you should have done!” Severus snapped at him. “You should have tied him up if necessary and then come to me. As your Head of House it is my duty to handle such situations. Why did you not come to me?”

Alioth swallowed unhappily as he realized that Severus actually seemed hurt that he hadn’t come to him. “I suspected that the Dark Lord was involved,” he admitted after a moment.

“All the more reason to come to me!” Severus almost shouted at him. “How could you think to face Him alone!”

“My family have always been loyal to him,” Alioth reasoned. “He had no reason to kill me. You on the other hand… I’m aware of the defense you used to avoid Azkaban after the Dark Lord’s fall.”

Severus’ jaw clenched and he was silent for a long moment before he ventured, “You went to face the Dark Lord in some morbid attempt to protect me?”

“I couldn’t send you down there to face him knowing that he might think you a traitor. No,” Alioth admitted gravely.

Severus turned away from Alioth and his shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. “Mr. Black, you are fifteen years old. It is not your place to protect adults, particularly adults in a position of authority over you.”

“I understand that, sir,” Alioth assured.

“Do you?” Severus bit out. “Because I have yet to see the evidence.”

“I said that I understand it,” Alioth qualified. “That doesn’t mean I’ll abide by it. Regardless of age or authority,” he went on before Severus could blow up again, “my odds of surviving the situation were greater than yours as far as I could judge. I could have made no other choice.”

Severus lifted one hand to rub at his temples like he was fighting a headache. “Your concern for my well-being is… touching,” he said the word with a slight twitch of his left eye, “but completely inappropriate, Mr. Black. I am your professor and your Head of House. That is the extent of our relationship.”

“I am aware of that,” Alioth asserted as Severus was beginning to look very wary now, “I hold a great deal of respect for you and would never wish to defy you, but if I feel that it is within my power to protect you, I will take steps to do so. I take care of the people I care about – I’m just built that way.”
Severus stared bleakly at the wall for a moment before giving a slight shake of his head and a wave of his wand toward the door. “Go to bed, Black,” he said tiredly.

“Goodnight, sir,” Alioth said affectionately right before he slipped through the door. Merlin, he didn’t know if he could wait until he turned seventeen – officially – much less until he graduated. He knew Severus wouldn’t ever have relations with someone underage, but Alioth wondered if the man would consider an affair with an of-age student. He supposed it was time to read through the Hogwarts Charter and figure out what the rules actually were with regard to professor/student relations.

Alioth was leaving dinner the final day of term when Not Harry stopped him. “Can we talk?” he asked, somewhere between hopeful and nervous.

Alioth glanced around and was surprised to find Not Harry seemed to be alone. It was a rare thing to see him without Ron or Hermione. “Sure,” he said amially, and led Harry to a nearby vacant classroom. Once they were inside, he warded the door, then dusted the room and transfigured a couple rickety old wooden stools into comfortable armchairs.

Not Harry’s eyes were slightly wide when Alioth looked at him again, gesturing him toward the new seats.

“How do you do that without saying the incantations?” he asked in fascination.

“Practice,” Alioth shrugged. “Spellcasting is really more about visualization and intent than word or wand movements. They are merely crutches to help people focus. They’re useful to help children learn.”

Not Harry smiled a little shyly.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” he asked pleasantly.

“Um…” Not Harry fidgeted nervously and Alioth frowned a bit, though the boy wasn’t meeting his eyes so he didn’t notice. If Not Harry was going to remain the figurehead of the Potter family, Alioth was going to have to teach him to sit still, but he wasn’t going to do that now while the boy obviously had something important on his mind. “You told me that we could talk about why Dumbledore didn’t ward that corridor better. Can- can we do that now?”

“Of course,” Alioth nodded agreeably, though he did draw his wand again and place more wards around the room than the simple locking and silencing charms he’d set the first time.

“What was that?” Not Harry asked nervously when Alioth was finished.

“Wards,” he explained. “They’ll prevent anyone from eavesdropping either physically or magically. Speaking poorly about Dumbledore is not greatly advised within a school where every portrait and ghost answers to him.”

Not Harry’s eyes widened again in comprehension.

“All right,” Alioth began. “I know of, off the top of my head, thirty wards Dumbledore could have used to secure that corridor – and those are just the Light wards. Hel, a simple age line set to keep out anyone under nineteen would have been enough.”

“There’s a ward that keeps people out based on age?” Not Harry asked, intrigued.
“There is,” Alioth smiled. “It’s not overly difficult or expensive to create. Dumbledore is a capable wizard. I’m quite certain that he could have ensured it was impossible for any student to wander down that corridor and be endangered by the Cerberus.”

“Okay, but then why didn’t he?” Not Harry pressed.

“In my opinion?”

Not Harry nodded encouragingly.

“He wanted you to go down there.”

“What?! Why? That doesn’t make any sense!” Not Harry objected, though he looked more freaked out than opposed to the statement.

“Harry,” Alioth began gently, then stopped and started over. “Do you know why Voldemort targeted your family?”

Not Harry shook his head silently.

“What I know of this is gained from what my father told me. There have been many members of my family that followed the Dark Lord, so we know some things that normal people wouldn’t.”

“Okay,” Not Harry whispered, eyes wide, breathing elevated, hands clasped together white knuckle between his knees.

“Maybe half a year before you were born, it was leaked from Dumbledore’s party that there was a prophecy made concerning the Dark Lord and a baby that would be born at the end of July.”

Not Harry flinched slightly.

“Given the criteria listed in the supposed prophecy, the baby came down to either you or Neville Longbottom. The prophecy stated that the baby would have the power to ‘vanquish’ Voldemort.”

“No,” Not Harry whispered.

Alioth reached out and gripped Not Harry’s clenched fists in his hand. “Just relax, Harry. It’ll be okay. I promise, okay?”

Slowly, Not Harry relaxed. He licked his lips and managed to nod.

“Anyway, it was due to that prophecy that Voldemort came after your parents. Your parents and Neville’s went into hiding under a spell called the Fidelius, in which they chose someone they trusted to guard the secret of their location. Unless that person gave the secret away, it was impossible for anyone who didn’t know the secret to find them. As everyone knows, they chose Sirius Black, who betrayed their Secret to Voldemort.

“Harry, in all honesty, the Dark Lord was insane toward the end of his campaign. No sane person would have gone after an infant based on the secondhand account of a portion of a prophecy given by a woman with absolutely no credentials as a real Seer.”

“Does this mean I have to… to defeat Voldemort?” Not Harry asked weakly.

“No,” Alioth said firmly. “It most definitely does not mean that, and don’t you ever let anyone tell you differently. First of all, the prophecy was supposedly given by Sybil Trelawney, who is the Divination teacher here at Hogwarts and she makes Binns look like an award winning teacher,
believe me. Anyone with a brain who has taken her class knows that she’s a two-bit hack. The only reason she got this job was because she gave that prophecy about you during her job interview with Dumbledore. It is entirely possible that it wasn’t even real. She may have faked it and Dumbledore just latched onto it in his desperate hope for a way to defeat Voldemort.

“Another possibility is that Dumbledore made it up himself as a way to lure Voldemort into destroying himself in the very way that he eventually did. And even if it is real, Harry, do you realize that you did vanquish him when he tried to kill you?”

“But he’s not dead…”

“The prophecy, Harry, never said that you would kill him or that your ‘vanquishing’ would be permanent. Come to that, it didn’t mention you more than very vaguely and it didn’t in any way stipulate that Voldemort was the Dark Lord it was talking about. There’s every possibility that it was referencing some Dark Lord that isn’t even born yet. Harry, you have to understand that prophecies, even if this is a real one, are incredibly vague. They are often only understood in hindsight and more often than not are self-fulfilling. You cannot live your life based on this prophecy.”

Not Harry nodded then, looking much more confident and calm.

“The point to all of this is that Dumbledore either does believe in this prophecy, or intends to use it as though it was real. He wants to use you, Harry, to try to defeat the Dark Lord. Again. His games got your parents killed and he won’t hesitate to do the same to you if you let him.”

“Even if that’s true,” Not Harry said judiciously, “What am I supposed to do against Albus Dumbledore?”

“I don’t mean to imply that you have to fight him or even openly defy him, Harry,” Alioth soothed. “You just need to accept the fact that he may not have your best wishes at heart and see through his lies. Don’t let him manipulate you. Don’t believe everything that he says just because it’s the Great Albus Dumbledore saying it. I’m not saying he’s an evil man, okay? Just that he doesn’t ever think of the small picture. He cares about the Greater Good. If he has to destroy your life to save a thousand others, he’ll do it without hesitation.”

Not Harry was silent for a long moment before he ventured. “But… isn’t that a good thing? Wanting to save a thousand people? I mean… maybe it’s worth it.”

Alioth sighed heavily. “Harry, if you truly want to sacrifice your life to save a thousand random people, I won’t try to stop you. I just want you to be able to make the choice. I want you to think about all of your choices before deciding that the only option is to become a martyr before you’re even an adult. I want you to think about the fact that Voldemort and his Death Eaters maybe don’t even plan on killing those thousand people in the first place and that you could be giving your life for nothing. Think about the fact that Dumbledore might be wrong and sacrificing your life may accomplish absolutely nothing. Don’t just buy into the idea that it’s you in exchange for the masses and prepare to die.”

“Why are you helping me, anyway?” Not Harry objected, looking thoroughly unsettled by this entire conversation.

Alioth leaned back in his chair. “Honestly?”

“Please,” Not Harry said quietly, staring at him intently.
“Lots of reasons. I knew right away from the moment you appeared in the Great Hall to be sorted that Dumbledore was going to use you as his chess piece in his war against Voldemort and I vowed then and there that I would do what I could to stop him and to keep you safe because no one deserves to be in that position at eleven years old. I hoped that I could keep you away from Dumbledore’s games and I hoped that I could maybe even convince you that the Dark side isn’t all bad.”

Not Harry flinched a little and leaned back in his chair as though he expected Alioth to attack him.

Alioth just nodded, “Yes, Harry. I am a Dark Wizard. My magic is Darkly aligned. I can and do cast Dark spells. However, none of that makes me evil, Harry. Despite what so many Light witches and wizards like to say, Dark magic is not inherently evil. It’s just another way of drawing on magic and some spells are more attuned to that way than others. Some wizards and witches find that their magic aligns to that manner of casting. Yes, a lot of Dark spells are used for horrible actions, but that doesn’t make the magic itself evil. Most of that actually comes down to some really heavy politics that I don’t want to get into right now, but it has to do with the oppression of Dark magic and the less than… warm and fuzzy ways that Dark wizards have tried to go about regaining their place in society. It also has to do with the fact that Dark magic just works really freaking well for some things, like dueling.

“Anyway,” Alioth dismissed, “that’s not something that we need to get into today, but I wanted to be honest with you. You will hold a great deal of political power when you turn seventeen and I thought that it would help the cause of Dark wizards all over Britain if he weren’t terribly prejudiced against us.

“As I’ve gotten to know you, however, I’ve also wanted to help you just because I honestly like you, Harry. You’re smart and brave and you are willing to think beyond the bigoted beliefs that people like your friend Weasley are always spouting. You’re a good kid and I’m sure you’ll grow into an amazing man and I would be honored to call you my friend.”

Not Harry swallowed and Alioth wondered if he’d laid that on a little thick. Eh, probably not. It wasn’t even necessarily untrue, though it was somewhat tailored to what he thought the kid could handle at this point.

“I like you, too,” Not Harry said after a moment, looking at his knees and blushing.

Alioth hoped the boy wasn’t developing a crush on him. That wasn’t something he could ever reciprocate, even after the kid grew up. Alioth’s heart had long since been spoken for. “It’s just about curfew,” Alioth said gently after a moment to smile when the boy glanced up at him.

“Right,” Not Harry nodded, standing up.

Alioth returned the chairs to their previous state, then unraveled his wards and unlocked the door, finally gesturing for Not Harry to precede him.

“Thanks, Alioth,” Not Harry said as they stepped out of the room. “For… everything.”

Alioth smiled gently and gripped the boy’s shoulder briefly, “Anytime, kiddo. Seriously.”

Not Harry flashed him another smile, then hurried off toward his common room.

“I should have known it was you when I found warding that heavy.”

Alioth looked over his shoulder with a smile as Severus stepped out of a shadowed alcove that had hidden him entirely from sight. “Hello, sir,” he greeted.
“What, exactly, were you doing locked in a heavily warded room with a boy more than three years your junior?” Severus inquired, though he looked more curious than perturbed.

Alioth laughed lightly, his eyes flitting around the walls, clocking every portrait and suit of armor spy within hearing distance, “He just wanted to talk, Professor. He was a bit disturbed by what happened with the Stone.”

Severus nodded slightly, his eyes following where Alioth’s had gone. “I see. You’ve become the boy’s confidant, then?”

“Perhaps more like an older brother,” Alioth shrugged. “He’s a good kid. It’s not that great a hardship.”

Severus sneered at him, “Perhaps you know a different Potter than I do.”

Alioth grinned wryly at that. “Perhaps the boy simply behaves differently with a peer that treats him kindly than he does with a professor that treats him like a deviant whether he deserves it or not.”

Severus glowered at that and took a step closer to Alioth. The move was probably meant to intimidate him with the looming, but Alioth’s reaction was pretty much exactly the opposite of feeling intimidated. He swallowed and tried not to lean toward the older man – and this was with his hormones considerably lowered from typical teenage levels. Thankfully, Severus didn’t seem to notice his reaction.

“Are you suggesting that I should also be coddling the little brat, Black?” he practically hissed. “That Potter deserves to be handled with velvet gloves just because he’s the Boy-Who-Lived?”

“No,” Alioth replied as calmly as he could when his head was filled with Severus’ spicy scent and he could feel the man’s body heat practically starting him on fire. “I’m suggesting that you treat him like any other student and judge him on his actions rather than his reputation or his parents.”

Severus’ nostrils flared and he had Alioth pinned against the wall by his shoulders in about a second.

Alioth tried to catch his breath and not think dirty thoughts.

“You know nothing, Black!” was growled right in Alioth’s face.

Looking up at the elder man, Alioth breathed in his scent and calmly replied, “I know, Professor. I know that you went to school with them, but Harry is not his father and he is not at fault for what happened to his mother.”

Severus snarled and shoved Alioth into the wall twice, hard enough to bruise – or it would have been if Alioth had blood flowing in his veins – but not hard enough to do any serious damage. Then he abruptly let go and stalked away very quickly.

Alioth let himself sag against the wall a little and closed his eyes, indulging for a moment in imagining something very much like that happening, but without clothes and somewhere without spying portraits. He opened his eyes and sneered at the nearest painting trying to pretend it wasn’t being nosy, then swept his way down to the dungeons. They’d be leaving tomorrow and he still had some packing to do.

Chapter End Notes
Please don’t give me Hel about Harry’s new name. I agonized for like an hour over a star name that was neither cliché nor annoying. If I missed the mark, well, I’m not going to go back and change it now.

To Those Hoping for Updates on my other stories: My health has made it very difficult for me to get any writing done lately, but I am still trying. This story has mostly been written to this point for a long time and just needed a little polishing, so I decided to share it. I will continue working on my other WIPs as well, do not fear.
Previously: Master of Death Harry Potter traveled back in time to his eight-year-old body. He made a deal with Arcturus Black to become his blood adopted heir and aged himself to join Hogwarts three years early as Alioth Black. In 1991, a boy named Harry Potter was sorted into Gryffindor and Alioth took it upon himself to look after Dumbledore's latest pawn. Over the year, Not Harry gradually came to trust Alioth and came to him for help when the Stone was threatened. Alioth reached the mirror room alone and bartered the Philosopher's Stone to Voldemort in exchange for ownership of his slave bond to Severus. Later, Alioth explained the Prophecy to Not Harry and discouraged any excessive bravery. When confronted by Severus about his interest in Not Harry, Alioth presented Severus with some hard truths about his own behavior.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Severus did not speak to him, or indeed, even look at him again for the rest of the year, which was a little disappointing, but not really surprising. Alioth knew how troubled the man was and he needed to start confronting some of those troubles if he was to grow through them. That was something that the Severus in his own time had come upon the hard way and only begun to do before he died for Dumbledore’s thrice damned Greater Good.

Alioth was confident that the man would not hate him for being the one to make the point. He was also confident that it would take time for him to get over the anger that had come when he’d raised the subject. Luckily, Severus had the whole summer to think on it without having to deal with students.

When the train dropped him off at King’s Cross Station, Alioth shrunk down his trunk with its auto-shrinking feature, and tucked it into his pocket before flooing to Castle Black. He hadn’t been expecting his pseudo father to show up at the station and he hadn’t been surprised.

As was part of their deal, Alioth had healed Lord Black of the “incurable” curse than had been killing him. The spell was a very nasty flesh-eating curse that basically ate a person from the inside out. The counter-curse had been employed when it was cast and that drastically slowed the curse, giving him months before a painful death rather than minutes. The healers had later been able to isolate the curse and prevent it from spreading, but the barriers had only been able to hold it for so long before it essentially learned to overcome them and then nothing could have saved him.

Though it was true that there was no cure for the curse, it wasn’t impossible to free him from it. Admittedly, the ritual needed was heavy dark magic and somewhat obscure. It was old healing magic that had been outlawed millennia ago in most countries, though it had once been quite common. When a king or noble became afflicted with an incurable malady of some form, the ritual was used to transfer the affliction into a slave or prisoner. The ritual was power intensive and usually required a casting circle to perform, but Alioth had power enough to do it. Not to say that he hadn’t felt the drain.
Given the nature of the curse, Alioth had been able to use a muggle. Had the curse targeted Arcturus’ magic, he’d have been forced to transfer it to someone with a magical core or it wouldn’t have worked. Part of him was aware of the fact that his conscience should have kicked up a fuss at the use of the muggle, but it just didn’t. Granted, it had helped that he’d grabbed some two-bit thug that had been beating on his girlfriend.

The majority of his summer, Alioth dedicated to researching the Dark Mark. It was an insidious piece of magic that Alioth frankly found disgusting. He could still remember what Severus had looked like when he’d found him. His arm had been charred to a blackened skeleton, his face twisted in agony, even in death. He hadn’t known then that killing Voldemort meant killing everyone marked. He’d not have done it had he known. He’d have found another way.

Dumbledore had known. The bastard’s portrait had confirmed it when he’d gone demanding answers after. “It had to be done. For the Greater Good,” were the last words the portrait uttered before Alioth had destroyed it utterly with a serpent of flame that had nearly escaped his shaky control and turned him to dust as well.

Nothing was going to harm Severus this time. Alioth wouldn’t allow it. He didn’t know what would happen to the man if Alioth’s body were seriously damaged or destroyed while Alioth held the bond of the man’s mark, which is why he was researching. He had to ensure that Severus wouldn’t be killed again. At any cost. The only reason Alioth had survived Severus dying the last time – at Alioth’s own hand – was because he couldn’t die. Even so, he’d spent the next twelve years in seclusion researching a way to get the man back.

He studied the mark through his connection to Severus and picked it apart one element at a time, slowly coming to understand exactly how the magic worked. It was insidious, indeed. It didn’t just bind them to Voldemort body and magic, but soul as well. That is why they were killed the way that they were. Voldemort’s soul had literally shredded the souls of all those connected to him through the Marks in its bid to keep itself among the living. That is why the ritual Alioth had used to kill him had taken so incredibly much power.

Gods, he couldn’t even imagine how badly Severus must have hurt in his last moments.

It took him three weeks into the summer to fully comprehend the magic of the Mark. He had to be absolutely certain that he wasn’t missing anything that could harm Severus if he tried to manipulate the magic in ignorance. Once he was sure that he understood what he was working with, it wasn’t difficult to design the ritual that would alter the soul connection so that instead of his soul using Severus to avoid death, Severus’ soul would use his. Given his immortality, it should ensure that Severus couldn’t die better than any horcrux. Severus’ soul remained whole, but it was connected to Alioth’s own in such a way that it couldn’t leave the world of the living unless Alioth did.

Satisfied with that, Alioth turned his attention to strengthening rituals. The human body was entirely too fragile for Alioth’s peace of mind and he didn’t wish to rely entirely on the soul connection to keep Severus among the living. A series of rituals – most of them admittedly Dark – would make Severus’ body much more resilient. Of course, he’d need the man’s consent and cooperation to carry them out, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t be prepared for the day he did get that cooperation.

In the midst of his research, Alioth did find time to track down Not Harry in the muggle world. The boy was living in a pristine townhouse in London with people who reminded Alioth disturbingly of the Dursleys.

Though he’d honestly only planned to look, Alioth found himself ringing the bell. Seeing
the boy he’d truly come to like stuck in summer living arrangements probably reminiscent of the Dursleys was not something that Alioth found he could easily let lie.

The man who answered the door was almost alarmingly like a male Petunia. He was stick thin and dressed in a perfectly pressed black suit. His neck was overly long, his eyes a cold blue full of judgment and scorn. Perhaps a muggle cousin he’d not known about?

“Can I help you, young man?” the man asked with barely restrained disdain. Apparently, he didn’t approve of teenagers despite Alioth’s fine black trousers and gray silk button-down.

“Yes, I’m looking for Harry,” Alioth smiled companionably, “I’m a friend from his school.” He wasn’t at all surprised when the man’s cold eyes chilled further at the mention of Harry and iced over entirely with the reference to Hogwarts.

“Wait here,” he sneered before closing the door in Alioth’s face.

Alioth stared at the door and twiddled his fingers against the porch rail while he entertained himself with idle plans for wiping out the rest of his mother’s family as none of them were apparently deserving of continuing to draw breath. Then again, this may be more of Dumbledore’s manipulations. Alioth truly wouldn’t be surprised if the old man had instilled a hatred of magic deliberately into these muggles to ensure Not Harry didn’t have a happy home life.

It was something he’d have to look into at some point, he supposed.

It didn’t take long before the door opened and a blushing Not Harry slipped through, closing it behind him. “Alioth,” he said uncomfortably, pulling at his too-small muggle clothes as though the effort could improve them rather than merely drawing even more attention to the ill-fitting garments. “What are you doing here? How do you even know where I live?”

“I… might have borrowed a strand of your hair before the end of term and performed a tracking spell,” Alioth admitted, then continued when Not Harry looked at him incredulously, “Slytherins are really better at seeking forgiveness than asking permission.”

Not Harry digested that for a moment before pressing, “Why did you even want to see me during the summer?”

“Honestly, I picked up on the fact that you weren’t thrilled to be returning to your guardians for the summer, so I thought I’d see if you wanted to spend the rest of the summer with me,” Alioth shrugged as though it wasn’t a big deal.

Now Not Harry looked completely stunned, then a little disturbed, “They’re not… that bad,” he shrugged uncomfortably.

Alioth lifted a doubtful eyebrow, but didn’t press the issue, “I don’t really care exactly what your relationship is with them, Harry. I’m not here to learn your secrets or ask uncomfortable questions. I just wanted to offer you an alternative. Just come for a couple of days, and if you decide that you want to stay, you can. If not, I’ll bring you back. Unless I miss my guess, your guardians would not protest too strongly to you spending the rest of the summer elsewhere.”

Not Harry snorted quietly, “If anything, they’d protest if I came back,” he muttered under his breath, then heaved a sigh, “All right. I guess I’ll come for a couple days and maybe see about more. Just, ah… wait here.”

“I shall be here when you return,” Alioth promised and watched Not Harry smile somewhat nervously, then disappear back inside.
Alioth sat down on the top step and gazed out over the pristine neighborhood while he waited. He was a little shocked at himself for the unplanned initiative to invite Not Harry to stay with him for the rest of the summer, but he didn’t regret it. The boy was decently likeable and Alioth really could not help but empathize with the kid who was almost literally in the same situation Alioth had suffered in his childhood. Stuck spending his time away from Hogwarts with people who detested him because Dumbledore wanted him more malleable…

It was less than five minutes wait before Not Harry was back, dragging his school trunk with him. Alioth resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He didn’t know if it was Hagrid or someone else that took the boy down the Alley, but how they justified buying the cheapest possible trunk for the supposed Heir of House Potter, he couldn’t understand. A basic model with only featherweight and shrinking charms built in wasn’t any more expensive than a wand. Alioth would have to see about correcting that oversight.

For now, he just bent down and picked up one end of it. He led Not Harry to a little alley shielded by an ornamental fence and some shrubbery, then reached for Not Harry’s hand.

“We’re going by portkey,” he explained, seeing recognition in the boy’s eyes, so he at least knew what a portkey was which is more than Alioth could say for himself at that age. “It’s in my ring,” he nodded toward the Black Heir ring on his right hand. “Just make sure you’re touching it and hold tight to your trunk.”

Not Harry nodded and did as he’d been instructed while Alioth sent a controlled spark of magic into the ring. He didn’t care for verbal passwords as a simple silencing spell would render them useless. It took some magical control to use this method, but that wasn’t a problem for him.

He used his grip on Not Harry’s hand to keep him on his feet as they landed in front of Castle Black.


“Castle Black,” Alioth agreed, nodding toward the crest carved into the stone above the door. A human skull, a gauntlet clutching a wand, and three crows surrounded by a bed of ivy.

“Whoa, ah… Your father’s okay with this, right?” Not Harry asked nervously. “I mean… you did say that a bunch of your family followed Voldemort, right? He doesn’t hate me or something, does he?”

Alioth smothered an amused smile at the fact that Not Harry had waited until now to ask these questions. The kid had a lot to learn. “My father is a Dark Wizard, Harry,” Alioth calmly explained, “but he’s never followed Voldemort, nor encouraged anyone in my family to follow him. He has no strong feelings toward you at this point and he won’t until you earn them through your actions. If you were to take actions or make public statements detrimental to the Dark Wizarding community, he would likely find cause to dislike you, but I don’t think you’re in a hurry to do that, right?”

Not Harry hesitated a thoughtful moment before shaking his head.

“Then you see, you’ve no cause for concern,” Alioth pointed out. “Demi.” The house-elf appeared with a pop and a bow. Not Harry flinched at the appearance of the elf, but Alioth ignored that for the moment. “Please take Mr. Potter’s things to his rooms.” With a snap of his fingers, the elf vanished along with Harry’s trunk.
“What was that?” Harry gasped.

“A house-elf,” Alioth smiled slightly, making a mental note to make sure the kid got a basic grounding in wizarding culture this summer. He hadn’t realized it as a kid, but it was downright embarrassing to be so completely ignorant of the world of which you were supposedly a part. No pureblood would respect the Potter Heir until he stopped asking questions like that. “They are bound servants of wizardkind. Castle Black has three, Demi, Semi, and Siggy, the former being Siggy’s sons. I’ll find you a book about their history tomorrow,” he offered and the boy had better read it. Alioth detested voluntary ignorance – it being the very thing that had repeatedly fucked over his young life. If he’d just taken the time to read a fucking book now and then so much may have been avoided.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to my father and then give you a tour.”

Though Not Harry was visibly nervous, he followed Alioth’s lead into the castle. Alioth tracked Arcturus to his favorite sunny alcove in the library. When they approached, Arcturus looked up, his eyes narrowing a bit as he took in Harry in his too-small muggle clothes. “And who is this?” he inquired.

“Harry Potter,” Alioth introduced.

Arcturus blinked at that, and then a small, bemused smile twitched at his lips as he looked the boy over. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter,” he nodded.


Arcturus lifted an eyebrow at Alioth at that.

“I’ve offered Harry a guest suite here for a few days. If he likes it, I’ve invited him to stay the rest of the summer,” Alioth explained.

Arcturus considered that a moment and then tipped his head slightly in a dismissive gesture, “Very well. He’s your responsibility.”

“Of course,” Alioth agreed. “Come on, Harry. How about that tour?”

Not Harry waited until they were out of the library to say, “You didn’t ask him if I could stay before you invited me?”

Alioth shrugged, “I knew he wouldn’t care.” Alioth wasn’t really his son, of course. He was really his heir, but Arcturus knew that his true age was closer to forty and consequently treated him like the adult he was in all but body, and an ally as their arrangement had made them.

Alioth showed him around the ground floor. It was as they started up to the second floor that Not Harry commented. “He doesn’t look ninety.”

Alioth smirked at him. “That’s because he’s a powerful wizard. We age more slowly than the muggles.”

Not Harry thought about that a moment before asking, somewhat incredulously, “Then how old is Dumbledore?”

The older boy chuckled, “A hundred fifteen or so.”

“Wow,” Not Harry observed.
Assuming a wizard lives to old age, he’ll die around a hundred forty or a hundred fifty. Of course, lots of them die younger from magical maladies or accidents or exposure to curses. We don’t get cancer or heart disease, but there’s still plenty of dangers claiming wizards before their time. Recently, of course, it was the war that took so many lives.”

Not Harry nodded silently, sobered by the direction the conversation had taken.

Alioth continued the tour, keeping it relatively brief by not showing the boy every room and corridor, merely explaining what sort of rooms were in each area they passed, giving a personal look at just the rooms Not Harry was likely to access during his visit.

Over the following week, Not Harry settled in rather comfortably at Castle Black. He spent most of his time with Alioth in the library. Alioth found him books to read and answered any questions they raised. He was pleasantly surprised to find that without distractions, Not Harry seemed not only capable, but interested in learning all about the magical world.

Alioth was careful to keep his lessons as non-biased as possible. It would serve no purpose to bias the boy against the Light with pretty lies, only for him to return to Hogwarts and discover them all. If they kept up as they were going, Not Harry would return to Hogwarts with a solid understanding of the wizarding world that they did not teach in school.

On the seventh day since his arrival at Castle Black, Alioth decided it was time Not Harry learned a little more about the Potter family.

“You’ve never been here before?” Alioth questioned.

“No,” Not Harry confirmed as they entered the bank. “Hagrid had a pouch of money from my vault for me when he took me shopping. We never had to stop here.”

“Well,” Alioth said with a shake of his head, “This is your future. You should know what you actually have. How else will you plan what you want to do with your life?”

Not Harry just shook his head uncertainly and followed Alioth up to the goblin at the central station.

“Good morning, Spearthrower,” Alioth greeted the goblin with a respectful inclination of his head. “We would like to speak with the Potter account manager.”

The goblin’s brow rose in surprise, but he didn’t hesitate to call another goblin to take them back. They were shown down a corridor in the back and into a lush office staffed by an older goblin.

“Hello, sirs,” the goblin greeted, focusing mostly on Alioth. “I am Stonefist, Account Manager for the Potter estate. How can I assist you?”

“Hello, Stonefist,” Alioth nodded, then deliberately stated, “I am Alioth Black. This,” he nodded to Not Harry, “is Harry Potter. He would like to see the accounts ledgers for the Potter holdings.”

Stonefist nodded slowly, looking curiously from Alioth to Not Harry. “Very well,” he said slowly and moved to a cabinet in the back. He quickly located a large, black, leather-bound book and brought it back to the desk. He turned it around and placed it in front of Not Harry with a wary glance at Alioth, who gave him a tiny nod of approval.

Alioth moved his chair closer to Not Harry and tipped the book open for him, helping him to see how to navigate it to locate everything he needed to know, getting a look at it himself in the
process. He’d never bothered to try to access the Potter estate before in this timeline, deeming it not worth the risk of Dumbledore learning something he shouldn’t. It wasn’t as though Alioth needed it. As the Heir Black, he had all the wealth he wanted and anything more he may need, he could get for himself. Gathering wealth was almost ridiculously easy when one combined his unique skills with his inability to die and his almost complete lack of scruples.

“This can’t all be mine,” Not Harry said at last after reviewing the dozens of properties, billions of galleons in shareholdings in both the wizarding and muggle worlds, and millions in liquid assets.

Alioth chuckled. “The Potter family is one of the wealthiest in wizarding Britain,” he explained. “It’s worth noting that the wizarding world in its entirety is several times richer than the muggle world. Magic has allowed us to gather more of the gold and precious gems in the world than the muggles ever could. That said, the majority of our wealth resides in the top one percent of our population, most of whom have been in that one percent for centuries if not millennia. The Potters are in that group, albeit not particularly high on the list.

“You need to know this, Harry, because this kind of wealth comes with responsibility. You need to learn how to manage it so that it isn’t squandered by you or anyone else who may be interested in manipulating you. Most heirs are trained for this role all their lives. You’ve missed out on that. Furthermore, as the sole living Potter, you’ll become Lord upon your seventeenth birthday, further limiting your time to prepare.”

Not Harry looked at Alioth grimly, “Will you help me?”

“Of course,” Alioth nodded without hesitation. It seemed increasingly likely that Not Harry would end up figurehead of the Potter Estate, which did make it Alioth’s responsibility to educate the boy.

“Can I trust you?” Not Harry asked astutely.

Alioth smiled broadly at the question. The kid was more shrewd than Alioth had been at that age. He hadn’t been able to properly imagine that anyone who was routinely nice to him could betray him.

To his ultimate downfall.

But then he’d never had a Slytherin confidant giving him pointers.

“I’ll give you a wand oath if you’d like,” Alioth said approvingly.

Not Harry smiled a little and blushed. “Thanks, Alioth,” he said quietly.

After the trip to the bank, Alioth gave Not Harry the asked for oath, choosing a binding one that wouldn’t steal his magic if he broke it, but rather employ his magic to make it impossible for him to break. He was careful in his wording to ensure that it wouldn’t be excessively restrictive, but would give Not Harry what he needed. He promised that he would never instruct or advise Not Harry in a way that he thought may be to the boy’s overall detriment. It left him plenty of leeway, but ensured that Not Harry could always trust his advice, which was a big deal for the Boy Who Lived and an admitted Dark wizard.

Shortly after their trip to the bank was Not Harry’s... not birthday. But the boy thought it was his birthday, so Alioth recognized it with a small cake prepared by the house-elves and a small gift in the form of a wand holster. Maybe it wasn't the most exciting gift, but Alioth was honestly out of practice at gift-giving and he knew it was something the boy needed.
"There's no candles," Not Harry observed with a bit of disappointment that he was obviously trying to hide as he looked upon the cake.

"The point of the candles is making a wish," Alioth acknowledged. "That's not a practice I approve of."

"Why not?" Not Harry asked, looking bewildered.

Alioth frowned deeply at the memories inspired by this conversation. He'd spent too many years wishing for things that never came. "Making a wish gives us the false hope of some greater power intervening on our behalf to grant said wish. It makes us complacent – lazy even. Much better is to make a resolution you wish to accomplish. Nothing in this world comes to us without effort. Nothing without cost. You can accomplish great things, Harry, but only if you work for it."

Not Harry stared gravely at his cake as he listened to Alioth and the elder wizard saw the boy's throat bob with a swallow as he stopped speaking.

Alioth gave him a moment to reflect on his words, then said more lightly, "But that doesn't mean you can't have fun as well. Today you turn twelve, an occasion to be celebrated. So make a resolution if you wish and let's cut this cake."

Not Harry gave him a smile at that and closed his eyes in concentration for a moment before giving a nod to himself and picking up the cake knife.

Alioth smiled and joined him in enjoying the delicious confection the elves had created for the occasion.

After they ate their cake - Not Harry imbibing three pieces before Alioth pointed out that he was going to make himself sick – Alioth took Not Harry to Diagon Alley again, this time to do some shopping.

Really, he probably should have taken the boy a lot sooner as he was still squeezing into the too-small muggle clothes provided by his relatives, but Alioth had gotten used to seeing him in them and had gotten entirely distracted between tutoring the young wizard and doing his own research into all of his options for prolonging Severus' life indefinitely. There were many ways to go about it if one wasn't too picky about morality, but Alioth wanted to be sure he knew exactly what the consequences could be from combining them. Severus didn't need to end up looking like ol' snakeface or something.

The school letters hadn't arrived yet so the Alley wasn't overly crowded, and they had no difficulty navigating it. Alioth took them first to a luggage store where he insisted on buying Not Harry a new trunk.

"But I already have a trunk," Not Harry complained for the third time when they entered the shop.

"What you have is no better than a muggle box," Alioth corrected disdainfully.

Not Harry looked mutinous.

Alioth sighed and stopped, turning to face the young wizard, "Is there a particular reason you're attached to your current trunk?" he inquired.

Not Harry looked a bit disarmed at being addressed calmly and reasonably when he'd been all set to dig in his heels for the sake of stubbornness alone. "I... I guess not," he was forced to admit. "But it still works perfectly and it's in good shape. I just don't see why we need to get a new one."
Alioth nodded approvingly for the reasoned argument. "Three reasons," he offered. "One, you store everything that you own inside of it as you surely don't leave anything with your relatives."

"Nothing I care about," Not Harry admitted.

"We can get you a new trunk that is larger on the inside than the outside so that you're not limited in what you can buy for yourself by what you can fit in your trunk." He gave that a second to register before continuing, "Two, you're always forced to lug it around by yourself even though it is both too bulky and too heavy for you to do that with any degree of comfort or dignity."

Not Harry colored a bit and looked at the floor near their feet but didn't comment.

Alioth took that for agreement and explained, "You can get a trunk with self-sizing charms so that you can shrink and restore it without using your magic any time of the year no matter where you are. That way you can tuck it into your pocket instead of dragging it around. And third, you are the heir of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. It is both absurd and disgraceful for you to be walking around in rags and lugging the cheapest possible trunk."

Not Harry's cheeks darkened and his frown turned to a scowl as he clenched his fists at his sides.

Alioth sighed again. Gryffindors. Honestly. "I realize that none of that is your fault, Harry, but you have to consider how it looks to outsiders. You can't expect everyone to know why you do the things you do if you don't tell them, so to them, it looks absurd and disgraceful. Consider, if you will, what you would think if you saw Draco Malfoy, Scion of House Malfoy, wearing ugly, ill-fitting clothes and lugging around a cheap trunk."

Not Harry's scowl loosened and his brow furrowed in thought.

"I'm assuming that none of your thoughts would be charitable or particularly pleasant except to mock him shamelessly," Alioth said gently when Not Harry remained silent. "Well, everyone who grew up in Wizarding Britain did so knowing that Harry Potter, in addition to being the Boy Who Lived, was also very wealthy and destined to be a Lord."

Not Harry heaved a huge sigh and sort of deflated on the exhale. "Okay. You made your point. You win."

Alioth smiled fondly, "I'm not trying to win, Harry. I'm trying to teach you."

"Well, lesson learned," Not Harry rallied admirably, straightening his shoulders and turning his attention to the merchandise in the shop. "So, then, what do you recommend for the heir of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter?"

Alioth grinned appreciatively at the boy and set to work educating him on luggage enchantments and which ones were useful versus those that were more showy than practical. It took close to an hour, but they left with a shiny new trunk, complete with the Potter Crest, shrunken comfortably in Not Harry's pocket. Not Harry had insisted on paying, and Alioth had allowed it with grace, repressing an ironic smirk the whole time.

Their next stop was at Twilfitt and Tattings, where Alioth set Not Harry up with an entire new wardrobe, all equipped with expensive sizing charms to allow them to grow up to an entire size with Not Harry through the year. Not Harry had insisted on paying, and Alioth had allowed it with grace, repressing an ironic smirk the whole time.

They also stopped at a cobbler to commission Not Harry several pairs of shoes and boots and a stationery store to order a writing set monogrammed with the Potter Crest for him to use for any
formal correspondence, which Not Harry was skeptical of needing and Alioth was insistent on him having nonetheless.

By the time they returned to Castle Black Not Harry seemed thoroughly sick of everything related to duty or responsibility. Alioth took pity on him and found him a recreational book to read about ancient wizarding sports that predated the invention of the flying broomstick and Not Harry visibly relaxed as he settled into a comfortable sofa in the library to read it.

Alioth had forgotten entirely about Dobby showing up this summer until Not Harry came to him the morning of August first with a tale about a very strange nocturnal visitor.

Alioth frowned gravely at this news. Dobby had never been less than loyal in Alioth's original timeline, even serving him without question when everyone else turned their backs on him and his use of Black Magic. That said, the elf had nearly gotten him killed several times in his second year and the odds of Not Harry managing to trick Lucius into freeing the elf this time around were extremely slim. Unless Albus had engineered that as well, of course.

He found himself suddenly torn between letting this play out and helping when necessary or trying to prevent Dobby's interference completely. Would threatening to tell the Malfoys be enough to scare off the defiant elf? And how would he even get into contact with the elf to make the threat. Also, he didn't want his unexplainable knowledge to raise too many questions.

Reluctantly, he resigned himself to trying to prevent the overzealous elf from accidentally killing the boy he was trying to protect. At least Not Harry didn't play Quidditch so they may be able to avoid the possessed bludger incident. Of course, that might mean that Dobby would act in some unexpected way that Alioth couldn't anticipate.

He advised Not Harry on the situation the best he could, pointing out that the elf was apparently betraying his master in an attempt to protect his beloved Harry Potter, which was extremely dangerous for a house-elf. If this was true, it could mean the elf was unstable and quite possibly dangerous even if not intentionally. He also pointed out that this could be an elaborate ruse to prevent Harry Potter from going to Hogwarts this term for whatever reason, with the elf being ordered to behave the way he was in order to fool him.

Not Harry promised to be wary of the elf and Alioth devoted some time to researching the best ways to defend against house elves that you didn't own. There was depressingly little literature on the subject as the wizarding populace seemed so determined to underestimate the creatures, but there were a few books in the Black Library. He also put out feelers with some used book sellers to purchase any such books at a premium price if they came across them. For now, there wasn’t much more to be done about it.

The following two weeks, Not Harry's time was divided between studying general wizarding culture and specific estate management and exactly what was involved in being the Lord of an Ancient and Noble House.

It was a month after Not Harry had come to stay with him, less than three weeks before they would return to Hogwarts, when Alioth found Not Harry face-planted in his book in the library.

"Everything okay?" He said by way of announcing his arrival, his mouth curved in a bemused smile.

Not Harry jumped like he'd been goosed and blushed heavily as he turned toward him. "Alioth! What? Oh. No. Nothing's wrong! Of course not! Why would you think anything's wrong?"
Alioth didn't bother dignifying that with a verbal response, merely raising a doubtful eyebrow.

Not Harry sighed expressively and visibly deflated. "I'm sorry! I'm about the most ungrateful person ever. I know."

"Why do you say that?" Alioth questioned, amused.

"Because, I know how much you've done for me this summer, and I'm probably the most ungrateful berk in the world, but Alioth, I'm going to completely lose my mind if I have to spend one more day in this library!"

Alioth managed to keep a straight face for almost three seconds before dissolving into laughter. Not Harry looked like he couldn't decide if he was more amused or unnerved by the display, which made it even more difficult to regain control. When he'd finally managed to calm, Alioth dropped himself into a chair opposite the boy and smiled at him warmly. He really had come to like Not Harry.

"Are you okay?" Not Harry asked warily when Alioth didn't immediately speak.

"Perfectly fine," Alioth assured. "I apologize for not realizing that you probably don't have my stamina for studying," he started, because it really hadn't occurred to him; when he'd been that age, he'd not have lasted a single week before making a display as Not Harry just had. He'd been spending his own time when he wasn't directly tutoring Harry on studying his own interests, which varied and were far more advanced than anything a Hogwarts student should be able to understand. "There are, of course, productive ways to occupy one's time that do not include sitting in a library or reading books."

"Really?" Not Harry looked comically relieved.

Alioth chuckled softly with amusement and stood once more. "Of course. Get your wand and your new sheath and meet me in the entrance hall."

Not Harry whooped quietly and raced out of the room.

Alioth smiled after the boy and made a leisurely trek to the entrance hall, where Not Harry shortly joined him. Without a word, Alioth led them through a hidden door and down a long staircase to the lower level of the castle, which was actually more expansive than the considerable bulk of the castle above the ground.

A few minutes of walking through winding corridors culminated in their arrival in a massive oval-shaped room with a smooth stone floor and equally smooth walls broken only by runic engravings along the bottom and top edge. The ceiling was spider-webbed with more runes. The lighting was comfortably bright and completely uniform despite there being no obvious source to it.

"The dueling chamber," Alioth explained to the visibly curious boy.

"Dueling?!" Not Harry asked excitedly. "Really?"

"The Trace doesn't work through these wards," Alioth explained, "So we're both free to cast whatever we like."

"Wicked!" Not Harry cheered, eagerly palming his wand.

"Indeed," Alioth smirked. "Are you ready for your first proper lesson in dueling?"
Though it had been many years, Alioth found that he fell into the position of instructor quite as comfortably as he had in his original fifth year, though he much preferred to teach a single, eager-to-learn student rather than a dozen or so students, half of which actively disliked or at least merely tolerated him.

He began by conjuring half a dozen wooden dummies along one wall. "Okay, I want you to show me every defensive spell you can think of."

It took a sadly very small amount of time for Harry – Not Harry – to complete that exercise. When he'd finished all the defensive spells he knew, Alioth had him work on the rest of the spells he could think of, even if he didn't think he could ever use them in a duel. As he went, Alioth made careful mental note of all the spells the boy had managed to learn to cast off the top of his head in his first year at Hogwarts. It wasn't much, a fact that Alioth would soon correct. He started plotting spellbooks for the boy to study while their lesson continued. Not Harry, he was pleased to find, was a fast learner when he had one-on-one instruction in a setting free of distractions. He wasn't sure how the boy fared in class, but judging by the display he'd put on, Alioth was guessing a little better than Alioth had done as a boy, but not by too much.

That, he planned to change if he could manage it. He was getting invested in the boy surviving to adulthood, after all.

Alioth hummed tunelessly, his eyes gently closed as he drifted through his mind to focus entirely on his connection to Severus. He had decided he had best to let Severus know that he no longer belonged to Voldemort. Of course, Alioth also thought it perhaps a bit precipitous to inform the man on to whom, exactly, he now belonged. The very last thing he wanted was to risk this in any way interfering with building an amiable relationship with Severus. If he was to make Severus love him as much as Alioth already adored the potions master, he thought it would need to come without such impediments. Severus had fallen in love with him once, after all, even with the misfortune of the name Potter standing between them.

Alioth carefully wrapped his magic around the link and numbed it before beginning. He wanted to be absolutely certain the man suffered no pain from this. Carefully, gently, Alioth fed his magic into the mark Severus bore. From what he knew of the mark from experience in both his lives, the symbol was not actually chosen, but a representation of the owner. The exact form was determined by his magic alone.

The skull and snake that represented Voldemort was likely representative of the Parselmouth gift and his soul-deep fear of death. Alioth strongly suspected that his would be the Deathly Hallows as being the Master of Death was more than merely a part of him.

As he felt the slow but steady accomplishment of his own magic replacing Voldemort's within Severus' mark, Alioth became convinced that this would be the work of several days, at least. Luckily, Alioth had magic to spare. So long as he didn't participate in any rituals or cast any extremely taxing spells, he would have very little difficulty. In this, requiring no sleep was a blessing. He could sleep, of course, just as he could eat, but it was an indulgence only. In no way necessary for his health.

Of course, the dead required very little in that way.

The work didn't require so much concentration that he couldn't still interact with Not Harry and go about his day relatively normally. Once he'd started on it, maintaining the effort was almost thoughtless, though he did need to keep channeling his magic into the task.
In the end, it took about three and a half days and caused Alioth to put off their trip to Diagon Alley a few days more than he might otherwise have. Their letters from Hogwarts had come the day after he’d started working on the Mark and Alioth had been mildly bemused, but not really surprised to find that he’d been made prefect. He wasn’t crazy about how the duties would cut into his free time, but he had to admit that the extra freedoms to be out after curfew and such would probably come in handy. Honestly, he was a little surprised that he’d made prefect at all after how he'd brassed off Severus at the end of term and his little excursion into the bowels of the castle that endangered himself and the "Boy-Who-Lived".

He hoped that this meant that Severus wasn't still angry at him, though it was also possible that Albus had decided to keep a closer eye on him and so had forced Severus to choose him.

Their trip to Diagon Alley occurred several days after Lockhart's book signing, thank the gods, not that Alioth would have gone that day even if he hadn't been otherwise occupied. That was one circus he was more than pleased to avoid. The very fact that so many people in the wizarding world were fooled by that charlatan honestly decimated Alioth's faith in wizardkind as a whole.

---

Severus set his book down on the sofa table in his quarters with a frown. He'd been staring at it for a quarter hour without absorbing anything from the page. His eyes fell to his left wrist and his jaw tightened. With slow, measured movements, he unbuttoned his cuff and rolled up his sleeve. There in stark black against his pale skin, the mark he'd worn since the summer after graduating Hogwarts – most of that time with shame – had been replaced with something completely different.

A triangle containing a vertically bisected circle.

He had, of course, researched the symbol immediately upon discovering it. The symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Three items gifted to mortalkind by Death himself. Items that had long been sought by wizards all over the world for it was said that the one to unite them would become the Master of Death. Though theories were abundant, none knew for sure what the Master of Death would be, what power he'd have, or whether it was actually a curse in disguise.

And now the Mark had magically inked itself into his skin.

Well, not just skin. Like the original Dark Mark had been, this one was part of his magic and impossible to remove or manipulate except by the creator.

Which could only mean...

Oh, Hel, he didn't know what it meant. It might mean that Voldemort had gained enough power and control to manipulate it, but what purpose would that have? Why change it from his Mark to this? And if it wasn't Voldemort's doing... perhaps it had happened as a result of something that had happened to Voldemort. Could it be that Voldemort had become the Master of Death? And what did it mean for them if that was the case?

Or had someone else somehow gained control of his mark? Of his... slavery bond.

He'd shown Albus earlier that day, almost two weeks after its appearance. The old man had no more clue than Severus did, though he'd seemed certain that no one had become the Master of Death. Certain enough that Severus wondered what the old man knew about that particular legend. Albus had made lots of statements that sounded intelligent and insightful, but if one had as much experience dealing with him as Severus had, it wasn't difficult to see that he was just as worried and confused as Severus himself.
He stared at the sooty black lines on his skin again and traced them lightly with one finger. He didn't know anything about this mark, but there were a few things he'd felt. For one, there had been no pain when it had changed and no pain since. The Dark Mark had been created with pain, utilized with pain, and routinely throbbed painfully whenever Voldemort's name was spoken in his presence. Sometimes it even throbbed for no apparent reason.

It didn't hurt anymore. Ever.

And there was the strangest magic just barely felt within it. It was an unusual magic. Cold. Still. Quiet. And yet somehow... comforting. Rather than demanding as Voldemort's magic had always felt, this one felt... protective, for lack of a better word.

Naturally, the instinct to be comforted by this magic just made him all the more paranoid, but that didn't change the fact that he slept more soundly since the mark had changed. He found it easier to concentrate and he wasn't as quick to temper. That comforting magic affected his subconscious more than he wanted to admit. More than he liked.

And it was making him incredibly curious.

Chapter End Notes

Been a while, right? Yeah, I'm still here. My dad got sick last year and was eventually diagnosed with cancer. They gave him 3-5 months. He passed away about a month after that diagnosis. I'm just starting to get back into writing again, so hopefully you'll see more of me in the future.
"Thank you for letting me stay here, Alioth," Harry blurted out over breakfast on September first. "And for... everything you've done, teaching me and stuff."

"It was my pleasure," Alioth smiled in return, and he was entirely honest in that statement. A normal summer for him since he'd come back tended to consist of losing himself somewhere between studying whatever struck his fancy and obsessing over how many days remained until he could see Severus again. "Would you be interested in doing it again next summer?"

Harry's eyes widened and his mouth stretched into a broad smile, "Yeah! That'd be great!"

"That's settled then," Alioth concluded.

After breakfast, Harry went to his room to finish packing while Alioth, who'd packed everything with a simple spell, settled down in the entrance courtyard with a book to pass the last hour until it was time to leave. Unlike the Weasleys, Alioth preferred to get to the train station at least half an hour before departure. Just in case anything delayed him. Also, it made it much easier to find a good compartment.

Alioth had spent enough time with Harry over the summer than he'd actually stopped thinking of him as his doppelganger. The boy's name more than likely was not Harry, but Alioth was willing to let him keep it.

Harry, bless him, arrived punctually, as instructed.

"You have your trunk?" Alioth questioned as he slipped his book into an expanded pocket in his robe - he kept at least one pocket expanded for books in every outfit he owned.

"Yep," Harry patted his pocket proudly.

Alioth swallowed a chuckle. The boy had come to appreciate the new trunk just as Alioth knew he'd learned to love the new casual robes that fit him comfortably and didn't make him ashamed to be seen in them. "Good. We're going to be flooing to Platform 9 ¾. I know you've read about using the floo, but don't forget to take a breath before you step into the fireplace so you don't breathe in any dust or ash. The address is simply 'platform 9 ¾'."

"Got it," Harry nodded decisively.

As soon as he turned around, Alioth hit him with a tracking spell. Just in case. Not only was it his first time flooing, but Alioth knew Dobby was probably still out there scheming to keep the boy away from Hogwarts this year.

Everything seemed to go to plan and Alioth quickly followed to ensure that Harry had arrived unscathed. He breathed a silent sigh of relief when he found him smiling happily next to the train.

"Come on. Let's get on the train," Alioth smiled, clapping the boy lightly on the shoulder. He wasn't letting Harry out of his sight until he was safely aboard. He did not need the kid flying an enchanted car to school. Not only was it dangerous – Alioth remembered nearly falling to his death from that car and nearly being pulped by the Whomping Willow upon arrival – but he really
didn't need to lose any and all progress Severus may have made over the summer by showing him immediate evidence that Harry was everything he'd always accused him of being.

Alioth escorted Harry onto the train and got him settled into an empty compartment – his friends hadn't arrived yet, not surprisingly – and then headed for the prefect compartment as he knew their first meeting of the year would take place as soon as they left the station. He occupied himself with his book again while he waited.

The expanded compartment didn't actually fill until several minutes after they left the station, and then the meeting finally got underway. Alioth was satisfied, though not exactly pleased, to find that it was exactly as annoying as he'd ever thought. It made him feel obscurely better about the times Ron and Hermione had left him to attend the prefect meetings.

Percy Weasley actually managed to be worse than he remembered, which was mildly shocking. He hadn't had any real contact with the boy before this as Percy was a year ahead of him and in a diametrically opposed House, but his extremely deficient personality became eminently apparent at the very beginning of the meeting. Before the headboy or headgirl could open the meeting, Percy was opening his mouth to lecture the late arrivals on proper punctuality and how it was more important than ever for prefects who were meant to be setting a good example. Alioth was pleased, at least, to see that he was far from the only one in the compartment to find the redhead ridiculous. In fact, there were only three people in the compartment who looked like they agreed with him. One was Penelope Clearwater and he honestly didn't recognize the other two.

The meeting covered what would be expected of them as prefects, such as setting a good example, helping other students in need, even if they weren't from the same House, and being fair-minded when exercising their authority. They were also informed of the prefects' common room, where they'd have monthly meetings and could also use whenever they wished, but they were asked not to bring anyone not a prefect into the room. The prefects' bathrooms. There were four, two for each gender, in the school. The passwords for this would be posted in the common room.

Eventually, after at least twice as much discussion as was really necessary to cover the information, they broke up into House groups to discuss their House in particular. There wasn't much to this transition as the students had automatically grouped by House upon arrival. Essentially, they just turned in their seats so they were facing the five other members from their own House.

The headboy this year was a Ravenclaw, the headgirl a Gryffindor, so for Slytherin, there were simply six prefects. The eldest Slytherin girl quickly went through what would be expected of them. The fifth year prefects would lead the new first years down to the common room where the seventh year prefects would gather them together and give them a short speech before introducing their head of house, who would give his annual start-of-year speech. Then the sixth year prefects would take the students of their gender to their dorms. In the morning, the fifth year prefects were responsible for getting the kids to breakfast, which they'd continue doing every day for the first week. The sixth year prefects, as it wasn't their OWL or NEWT year, would be the ones to escort the first years to their classes all week.

All of this was pretty familiar to everyone because they did the same thing every year and they'd all experienced it themselves in their first year and seen it happening every year since.

They were also expected to spend at least thirty minutes in the common room every day - an hour on weekends – during which they would make themselves available to any student in need, be it with homework help or just general advice. They'd each be assigned a time every day so that someone was regularly available.

All-in-all, it was a lot more work than the Gryffindor prefects ever did. Ron had used his prefect
authority to bully the younger years and even Hermione hadn't ever devoted time specifically to helping students who needed it. She was always completely distracted between her own classes and whatever crisis the three of them had going on at the moment. Not that this surprised Alioth. One thing he'd learned since becoming a Slytherin was that Slytherins looked after each other. It was one benefit of being ostracized by so much of the school. Not to say that they didn't bicker and fight, because they definitely did, but they were more like a real family than Gryffindor ever was. Even the family members you couldn't stand were still your family and you'd still side with them over outsiders.

At least, Alioth thought that's what family was supposed to be. He wasn’t much of an authority on the subject.

Alioth didn't bother leaving the compartment when everyone else left to go find their friends. He'd never made any friends since coming back. Actually, he hadn't had any friends since the war ended. That had been... sixteen years ago. Merlin, he was kind of sad, wasn't he?

Well, no matter. He'd have Severus sooner or later. What more could he need?

Thankfully, he appeared to be the only prefect to have the idea of sticking around because he soon found himself completely alone. Quite content with that turn of events – he'd never gotten along much with kids, Not Harry notwithstanding – he settled back to continue reading. After a few minutes, he found a journal and self-inking quill in his expanded pocket and started marking down notes about the book. It was giving him some interesting ideas for a spell.

The ride passed quickly that way. When the snack cart came by, he purchased a bottle of butterbeer to quench his thirst and kept on working. When they eventually arrived at the station, Alioth put his things away and joined the rest of the student body in making his way to the school.

When he entered the Great Hall, his eyes immediately sought out Severus at the head table, which was something that he did at the beginning of every year. This time, though, for the first time, Severus was looking back at him. Their eyes held for a long moment and Alioth found himself unable to define what Severus might be thinking or feeling. He could usually tell, having the advantage of having known the man intimately, but the length of the Great Hall separating them probably wasn't helping.

The meal passed without surprises, though Alioth inwardly groaned at the reminder that he was going to have to deal with Lockhart all year. How he was going to do that without killing or at least maiming the fool, Alioth wasn't entirely sure, but he figured he'd play it by ear. If killing or maiming became absolutely necessary, he was certain he could manage to avoid getting implicated.

He couldn't help but make note of which Slytherins were stupid enough to be swooning over that pathetic excuse for a wizard, though. He knew that he'd probably privately hold it against them for the rest of their lives whether he meant to or not.

When the meal was over, Alioth joined Tawny Wilkins, the other fifth year Slytherin prefect, in leading the new first years down to the common room. The division of duties among the prefects helped the first years to be familiar with all of the prefects, a thing that Gryffindor should try. In his original timeline, he couldn't remember ever in all the years he attended actually knowing who all of the Gryffindor prefects were in any given year. Percy never let anyone forget he was a prefect, of course, and Hermione made sure no one forgot that Ron was as she was constantly snapping it at him "You're a prefect, Ronald, act like it" etcetera, but most prefects in Gryffindor just didn't actually interact much with the rest of the House as prefects.

In the common room, his duties for the night ended as the seventh years took over educating the
first years briefly on what they could expect, especially in the coming week, with the prefects ensuring they were able to find their classes and that a schedule of times the prefects could be found in the common room would be posted on the notice board. Then they gave them Severus' office hours, which were from four-thirty to six on Tuesday and Thursday and ten to noon on Saturdays. Finally, they introduced their Head of House, who had arrived unobtrusively during the speech and remained concealed in the shadows until his cue.

Severus stepped forward, somehow managing to look stern and approachable at the same time, as he always managed for his start-of-year speech to the first years. He went through a basic introduction to Slytherin House and what would be expected of them. He informed them that Slytherins always stick together, always present a united front, and always handle their problems in House. He encouraged them to go to the prefects with their problems if possible before going to him, but promised in his own cold, brusque way to be there for them if they needed him.

When he was finished, he swept out of the room as quietly as he'd entered. Alioth moved quickly to follow him and Severus glanced back at him almost immediately. Something like unease flashed briefly behind his dark eyes before they hardened and he gave a small nod, almost to himself. He led them to his office and closed and warded the door as he always did. Alioth approved of the paranoia inherent in that act.

"I wanted to apologize for how I spoke to you at the end of last term," Alioth began directly, because Severus had needed to hear what Alioth had said, but that didn't change the fact that he'd been more than a little impertinent and he couldn't bear to think of Severus thinking of him as a bratty child one moment longer.

Severus' shoulders relaxed infinitesimally in response to the apology and he shook his head slowly as he moved across the office to lean against the front of his desk. "While I appreciate the sentiment, Mr. Black, it is I who should be apologizing. Regardless of what you said, I... It cannot excuse that I assaulted you. You would be well within your rights to file a grievance with the school board-"

"I wouldn't," Alioth hated to interrupt the man as it was disrespectful, and he knew Severus hated being disrespected, but he couldn't listen to him go on like that. "You must know that I wouldn't," he appealed. "I practically goaded you into that, sir."

Severus took on a faintly long-suffering look, "As usual, Mr. Black, you appear to be missing the very important distinction that I am not one of your peers. I am your professor and as such am held to a much higher standard, both by the school and by myself. No amount of 'goading' can excuse the fact that I laid my hands on you violently."

Alioth dismissed the errant thought about what he'd like Severus to do while laying hands on him. The man was clearly distressed in a way Alioth honestly hadn't anticipated, though he realized now that he should have. Not only was Alioth a student, but one of Severus' Slytherins and the professor had honestly assaulted him gravely enough that Alioth knew he would have had bruises had he been alive. Really, if Severus had done that to any other student, he'd have expected such an attack of conscience. But Severus was right. Alioth did not and could not place himself into the role of any other student. Intellectually, he was thirty-seven years old and he'd been through enough in his life to make him feel at least twice that. If Severus had done what he had to an adult who'd been goading him, he'd not have felt badly at all.

Alioth sort of wished he could just tell the man the truth, but he was reasonably certain that it was too soon for that.

"Professor, you didn't hurt me," Alioth promised, which was true enough. His mind had been so
far in the gutter during that confrontation that it had felt more like foreplay than violence.

"That does not pardon my-"

Alioth took a step toward Severus and the physically older man went very still, his hands clenching around the edge of his desk as though he was afraid he might randomly attack his student if he wasn't very careful. Alioth sighed unhappily, "You didn't hurt me," he said again, more gently. "I suspect my words wounded far more deeply."

Severus' jaw clenched at that and a protracted moment of silence passed before he finally asked, very stiffly, "How exactly, Mr. Black, did you know to say what you did?" Alioth suspected that Severus had been wanting to ask that question for a long time now.

Alioth paused briefly, then continued across the room, leaning himself against the desk next to Severus. He left a respectable distance between them, but used the move both to subtly equalize them and so that he could give Severus the courtesy of not being stared at during this conversation.

"I'm not unfamiliar with your past. You'll remember I mentioned before that I knew how you'd avoided Azkaban after the war."

Severus said nothing for a long moment before finally speaking quietly, his voice somewhat wary, "Why," was all he said.

Alioth gave a small shrug, "I'm interested in you."

Severus tensed further at that, "Black..."

Alioth huffed a small, humorless chuckle and decided it was probably time enough to give Severus some truth, "Yes, professor, I'm afraid I have a terribly inappropriate crush on you. I suspect that makes you uncomfortable and I do apologize for that fact."

Severus lifted one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, then seemed to realize that they were sitting within arms reach of each other and quickly stood up. He took a few steps away before turning to face Alioth again. "Mr. Black," he began stiffly.

"I know," Alioth said before he had to listen to an explanation of why his feelings were wrong and would never be returned. "Don't worry, sir, I won't mention it again."

Severus studied him suspiciously as Alioth backed toward the door, expecting this conversation was probably best left here. When Alioth reached for the doorknob, Severus drew his wand to remove the locking and silencing charms.

With a small smile, Alioth let himself out of the office. On the walk back to his dorm, he realized that no matter how passionately he craved the other man, he would wait a lifetime or more if that was what Severus needed. Just so long as he could have some part in the man's life, he'd be satisfied. Not happy, but satisfied.

He could not, however, convince himself that he wouldn't curse and systematically destroy anyone that dared to actually date his love, but, he supposed, no one was perfect.

Alioth made an effort to avoid literally twiddling his thumbs as he sat in the common room waiting for his imposed time to end. This prefect business really could be annoying. Especially because his reputation was such that none of the other students actually dared to approach him for anything. It really hadn't taken long for the new first years to be read in on the situation, it seemed,
because they'd started giving him a wide berth by the end of the second day in the castle.

Just as well, he supposed. He'd never been much a fan of children. Not since he'd been one, at least. They were just so... terribly naïve. It gave him the inappropriate urge to ruthlessly crush all of their tiny hopes and dreams until they could see the world for the ugly, unforgiving place it was.

Which made him think that his avoiding the small humans was probably best for everyone.

Harry was the exception, probably because he empathized so much with the poor kid. Being Dumbledore's favorite pawn was no enviable position to hold and the poor kid hadn't even known it. So, naturally, Alioth had needed to educate him, and... Well, the kid grew on him. He honestly couldn't define what it was about him that Alioth found enjoyable, but he wasn't terrible company.

And maybe... possibly... Alioth was appeasing that fucking implacable urge to protect that he apparently had not yet managed to shake. At least every poor bastard on the planet didn't set it off anymore. He supposed that could be counted as progress.

Personally, he thought his urge to save select people was an improvement on Dumbledore's perverse need to save "everyone" while sacrificing a choice few to the cause. It wasn't that Alioth didn't understand the need to sacrifice the one for the many sometimes. The world was a cruel and ugly place and it was impractical to save the few at the expense of the many, even if that really sucked. He supposed it was really the way Albus went about it that he found so objectionable. The complete lack of loyalty to those who gave their trust to him. The betrayal in what he'd done first in failing to protect James and Lily and then in setting up their son as the sacrificial lamb. And that was what the old bastard had meant for him. After he'd died, Alioth had turned to Dark Magic to fight the Death Eaters and Voldemort on more even terms. He'd started killing instead of stunning. That's what had prolonged his life. Still, he'd foolishly followed the clues Dumbledore had left behind and it had led to him using that ritual to kill Voldemort. It had led him to killing Voldemort and all the Death Eaters by channeling so much magic through his body that it had killed him as well.

Only the fact that he'd gathered all the Hallows at that point had kept him in the world of the living, even if his body hadn't managed to actually return to life.

Alioth had nothing against manipulation nor sacrifice when it was necessary, but he would never betray those who pledged themselves to him and his cause, who trusted him to help them. It's why he'd had no problem giving Harry the oath to never advise the boy in a way that may ultimately bring him harm. It hadn't been difficult to make the oath because it was something he'd have done anyway. Not to say he wouldn't manipulate him, but he'd steer the boy toward a long and happy life that would hopefully benefit Alioth as well.

Dumbledore was a hypocrite. He supposed at the heart of it, that's what really bothered him. The man preached one thing, expected it of his followers, shaped the world to it, and all the while he was doing the very opposite. He demonized Dark Magic, yet used it for his own purposes. He said that everyone deserved a second chance and killing even Death Eaters was wrong, then he manipulated Alioth into mass murder-suicide and gave himself a blanket pass on it by saying it was for the Greater Good.

Alioth wondered if he should just kill Dumbledore and put him out of everyone's misery. It certainly wasn't something he'd be opposed to doing. Not that the old man wouldn't be dangerous, but Alioth was pretty sure the Elder Wand would answer to him over Albus. Plus, dueling him would be a last resort. He'd gotten over his Gryffindor notion of fairness a long time ago. He was not above poisoning the old man's lemon drops. It would actually probably be extremely satisfying to murder the old bastard as he'd wanted so badly to do after Severus had died when he'd had
nothing left to take out his anger on except a painting.

Damn, now that he'd thought of it, it was really tempting. He was a little surprised that the idea hadn't occurred to him before, but since coming back, he'd been really focused on Severus more than anything. As it should be, really.

He wondered how Severus would feel if Albus was suddenly killed. He wondered if he cared. He suspected that Severus had always had some twisted affection for the old bastard, but he hadn't really gotten to know the man until after Albus' death, and Severus wasn't really big on talking about his feelings, so they'd never discussed it. Honestly, that idea just made him want to kill the old man more. He'd used and manipulated Severus for decades, probably planning his death from the beginning, just as he'd done with Alioth, and all the while Severus cared for him. Just as Alioth had.

There was Voldemort to consider as well, of course, but Alioth honestly had nothing personally against him. Yes, he'd killed Alioth's parents, but he'd been so batshit insane at the time that he barely owned any of the blame for it. And anyway, all he'd done was kill two people who were his enemies. His fixation on Alioth had been Dumbledore's doing, just as basically every other major hardship in his life had been.

If he was honest with himself, he'd prefer to let a sane Voldemort have his way with Wizarding Britain - it seriously couldn't be any worse than the bang up job the Light had been doing at running the country. And Voldemort should be sane if he used the Elixir of Life both to come back and to maintain his youth and health. As far as Alioth could judge without studying the artifact himself, it should be able to counter the deterioration caused by the horcruxes.

He supposed he'd leave it up to Severus. Alioth really didn't have enough concern for politics to feel too strongly about whether they let Voldemort take over or not, but he knew he wasn't going to leave Dumbledore in charge. The sentiment that he'd do anything for Severus didn't extend to things detrimental to him, like Albus' poisonous influence.

He gave that a moment of thought and decided that Severus would undoubtedly find that annoying about him, but it didn't change how he felt about it.

A glance at the clock pulled Alioth from his thoughts and he rose gratefully upon noting that his imposed common room time had elapsed. Merlin but that was going to get old fast. Though he supposed he could just bring a book to read next time if no one was going to be brave enough to approach him anyway.

It was almost two weeks later before Alioth managed to corner Harry alone as the boy was wandering the corridors after dinner. When Harry noticed Alioth's approach, he suddenly looked nervous and looked around as though for an escape, but Alioth gave him no chance, ushering him into an unused lounge of some sort. He quickly locked and silenced the door and gave the room a quick magical sweep to be sure they were alone and free of magical spies.

"You've been avoiding me," he said when he finally turned his full attention to the clearly uneasy boy. "What's going on?"

Harry chewed on his lip and his eyes continued to dart around for an escape, but he managed to answer, "I... I’m sorry. I just...

"What?" Alioth probed, gentling his voice to calm the boy even as he sent a light Legilimency probe into the boy's mind.
"It's just that... Ron's dad has been saying that Voldemort is coming back soon and that everyone needs to be careful. Especially around anyone with a family with... Dark leanings."

Alioth sighed angrily as he located the real problem in Harry's mind. More of Dumbledore's meddling, no doubt. A compulsion to distrust Slytherins, especially Alioth. Merlin, that old fool. Alioth probably should have expected this, really. He'd helped the boy out of danger more than once already. How could one groom a sacrificial lamb when he had a mentor protecting him and teaching him?

He wondered if he'd ever stop underestimating the old man's capacity for fucking with people's lives for his own ends.

To Harry, Alioth said, "Harry, you spent most of the summer living with my father and me. Don't you think that if you'd been in any danger from us it would have materialized then?"

Harry looked like he did think that, but continued spouting what he'd been told anyway, albeit with some obvious doubt, "Yeah, that's pretty much what I told them, but then they said that it would be different when Voldemort returned. That... you'd have to do what he wanted."

Alioth's brow rose at that. "Harry, following Voldemort wiped out the majority of the Black family. Just because we're Dark doesn't mean we're willing to throw our lot in with him again."

Harry grimaced, but nodded. He looked like he wanted to be convinced. Dumbledore hadn't used a strong enough compulsion. He'd given Harry too much reason to trust him this summer, especially with that magical oath.

"You know that I'm literally incapable of doing anything to harm you, Harry," he added, putting a mild plea into his voice.

Harry reacted to it as he expected. He now looked guilty for having ever doubted Alioth.

Since it hadn't actually been the boy's fault, Alioth wasn't going to hold it against him. But neither was he going to try to convince him of what had happened. Even if Harry did believe him, he was wary of doing anything that would draw Dumbledore's notice more than necessary. The compulsion hadn't been strong enough to draw Dumbledore's notice more than necessary. The compulsion hadn't been that strong probably because Dumbledore wanted them to drift apart more naturally so as not to draw attention to it from anyone, including Alioth himself.

"It's okay," Alioth offered before Harry could try to apologize. "I'm not angry, I just hope that you remember that I'm not the enemy, okay? I really am just trying to help you."

Harry nodded determinedly.

"The reason I've been trying to talk to you is because I was wondering if I could interest you in continuing our tutoring during the school year. Just like an hour a week? There's something specific I'd like to teach you."

"What is it?" Harry asked excitedly.

"It's called Occlumency. It's a magical discipline of the mind. It will help you with memory, concentration, and even help you to use your magic more effectively. Even more importantly, it will allow you to protect your mind from outside influence."

Though the first parts made Harry look like he couldn't wait to get started, the second made him frown, "What does that mean? Outside influence."
"It will block other magicals from accessing your mind to read your thoughts or view your memories. It will also provide protection from spells like confundus, befuddlement, and compulsion charms. It will ensure that your mind is your own. And the memory retention really will make school a hundred times easier."

Harry shook his head unhappily, "So mind reading is a real thing? People can do that?"

"Yes," Alioth promised. "It is. Occlumency is a thing that every heir is taught from infancy - there are actually toys designed specifically to teach babies to start ordering their mind. As Heir to House Potter, this is something that you should know. As Harry Potter, this is something you need to know."

"You can teach me that?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I can," Alioth assured, "but it's hard work and it takes months to gain a solid understanding. Years to master. I'll give you a lesson once a week, but you'll need to practice it every day for at least an hour. Think you can do that?"

Harry nodded seriously, "I don't want anyone in my head."

That was not a surprising stance, but the boy was going to be very unhappy when he gained enough control of his mind to start finding the inconsistencies.

"Hermione will want to learn, too," Harry observed after a moment.

Alioth tried not to grimace. Though he'd loved her once – maybe still did love the friend she'd been in his youth – she'd hurt him badly when her blind faith in Dumbledore's dogma had made her incapable of standing by him in the end. "No," he said bluntly.

Harry grimaced, but didn't seem surprised.

"She's a nice enough person from what I know of her," Alioth placated, "but she's got a massive chip on her shoulder that I don't need to deal with."

Now Harry looked curious. "What do you mean?"

"She's entirely convinced that everything Dark is evil and everyone with a Darkly aligned magical core hates her for her blood status," Alioth explained. "Also she's extremely opinionated even though all of her opinions are merely copied from books or people like Dumbledore and not actually gained through research and contemplation."

Harry's brow furrowed as he listened and he shook his head slightly when Alioth stopped talking. "Okay, I'm sorry if this is stupid, but I kind of thought that you didn't like muggleborns." He blushed a little as he said it.

"I don't care about their blood," Alioth explained. "It's the attitude common to muggleborns that offends me. They disdain our culture for being different from the muggle one, they try to change us to fit their ideals, and all the while they complain about not being respected or given the same employment opportunities. Do you know what would happen if half our ministry was staffed by muggleborns? They'd be shaping us into a copy of the muggle world at every opportunity, and that's neither fair to our culture, nor proper as the inclusion of magic makes us different and our government necessarily so."

Harry nodded slowly as he listened and looked like he was thinking it over. "I guess you have a point," he conceded. "I never thought of it that way before."
Alioth shrugged mildly, "It's not surprising. Voldemort's anti-muggleborn crusade is the kind of extremism that enforces the belief that muggleborn are victims and Dumbledore makes it worse with his encouragement of House prejudices and utter lack of concern for employing a history teacher that can actually educate anyone about the history of our people without putting them all to sleep."

"How does he encourage House prejudice?" Harry wondered.

"He himself favors the Gryffindors," Alioth pointed out. "You ever notice that his office is decorated in red and gold even though he's supposed to be nonbiased now as headmaster? He's also got a reputation for waving off offenses done by the Gryffindors that would warrant suspension if not expulsion from a Slytherin. And he very rarely bothers to give House points to anyone, but when he does, it's almost always a Gryffindor." Alioth shook his head and cast a quick silent tempus. "As entertaining as this conversation is turning out to be, I have to get back to the common room for my prefect duties."

"Oh. Right. Sorry," Harry blushed again.

Alioth couldn't resist an amused smile, "I wasn't lying, Harry. I do enjoy talking to you. Trust me, if I didn't, I'd never have invited you to stay with me again next summer."

Harry grinned at that and they parted ways with a friendly wave. The compulsion might start to bother him again if he spent much time away from Alioth, but he didn't think it was strong enough to prevent the boy from showing up for Occlumency lessons.

The Occlumency lessons went about a thousand times better than Alioth's had gone with Severus in his first fifth year. With patience and trust on both sides of the equation, both were able to relax and give their best effort.

Harry, probably not surprisingly, found Occlumency incredibly challenging, just as Alioth had. He strongly suspected Dumbledore's meddling in this, perhaps intentionally, even. At the very least, all of the layers of mental tampering were making the boy's mind much louder than it should have been and making it almost impossible for him to clear his mind. It was all a little too reminiscent of Alioth's own experience.

It was enough to make him wonder if he was even Harry Potter. Luckily, he settled that score with himself relatively quickly. Point One: the goblins recognized Alioth as Harry Potter. They did not feel the same for Harry. Point Two: Despite the initial difficulties, Alioth had mastered Occlumency, and with it, he felt reasonably comfortable that he knew his own mind. Point Three: Alioth had possessed a sliver of Voldemort's soul that had given him the gift of parseltongue – since coming back, he now possessed it again.

No, despite his well-developed paranoia, he was sure that he really was Harry Potter.

Training Harry was making slow but steady progress, for the boy was struggling, but remained tenacious in spite of that.

Alioth's duties as prefect continued to be tedious, but he was getting used to the wasted time devoted to meetings and patrolling. He tried to make the best of it by taking detours in his patrols to "borrow" books from the restricted section of the library when no one was around to notice. His time he was forced to sit in the common room, he'd learned to just bring a book to read or an essay to work on. By the time Halloween rolled around, he'd yet to be bothered even once while performing that particular duty.
And then, of course, there was Halloween.

Alioth cursed under his breath as he stared at the petrified cat Dumbledore had carefully removed from the wall sconce where it had been hung. He mentally berated himself for a long moment until he realized that most everyone else had cleared out of the corridor, leaving him standing in the middle of it alone staring at the cat in Dumbledore's hand. His eyes quickly darted up to find Dumbledore and Severus both watching him intently.

He aimed a vague grimace in their direction before turning and making his way back to his dorm. Merlin, he wanted to smack himself. He'd actually, literally forgotten about the diary. Between Dumbledore's manipulations, Harry's lessons, Severus' studious avoidance, and the annoyance that was studies he half knew by heart and half had forgotten completely since his first time through, he'd been more than busy enough so far this year, but honestly... He'd forgotten the ancient basilisk that had terrorized his second year at Hogwarts.

Well, of course he'd thought of it previously, just not so much this year.

First thing the next day, he got out the map and tracked down Ginny Weasley. When she stopped by a bathroom on her way to breakfast, she was the only one in there and he took the opportunity to confront her. Well, first he disillusioned himself, then stepped inside and stunned her. He relieved her of a certain diary that positively reeked of Dark Magic – no way Dumbledore hadn't noticed that in his school - and enervated her just as he slipped invisibly out the door. He took the diary immediately to the Chamber of Secrets. It was the safest place for it by far.

Myrtle was in the bathroom, but he was invisible and he didn't speak to her despite her demands to know who was there.

Once he had the diary safely secured in the Chamber, it occurred to him that there was another horcrux within his reach. That led to a trip up to the Room of Requirement. It was remarkable how accurately he remembered the way after all these years, but it didn't take him long to find the diadem, though the vanishing cabinet hadn't been brought into the room yet.

Back in the Chamber, he decided that he would need to deal with the basilisk. He honestly didn't want to kill the poor thing if he could help it, and for more reasons than one. He could make a fortune from selling a basilisk corpse off piece by piece, but it was a much better investment to merely sell shed skin and venom over the long term, especially considering Alioth's "lifespan".

Of course, that would require a degree of cooperation from the basilisk, but they weren't stupid creatures. They were, in fact, the most intelligent serpents in the world, which was a large part of why he didn't want to put her down like a rabid dog.

Unless, of course, she was mad, in which case it would be lunacy of the highest order to leave her alive in a freaking school.

He took a few minutes to mentally review all of the best spells he would use if she attacked him. He wasn't worried about dying for obvious reasons, but he'd really rather not get eaten if at all possible. His nerves processed pain exactly as they had when he was alive, as near as he could tell, so he was quite certain that it would be unbelievably unpleasant.

Once he felt relatively confident that he would survive the encounter, he called out the egocentric pass phrase and watched the door slide open.

"Greetings, Serpent Queen," Alioth said as soon as she appeared, hopefully before she decided to
eat him. The hue of her eyes was truly incredible, he couldn't help but notice, thrilling more than a little at being quite possibly one of the first if not the first person to look directly into the eyes of a basilisk without sudden death sort of spoiling the experience. A vampire could manage it, he supposed, but with the rarity of basilisks and relative rarity of vampires, it was possible it had never happened.

The massive serpent coiled herself in front of Alioth in such a way that she would have him in her mouth probably less than a second after deciding to eat him.

Lovely.

Her tongue flicked out at him a few times before she spoke, "What do you want of me, Dead One?"

The form of address made Alioth feel vaguely like he smelled even though he was sure someone would have mentioned it by now if he actually smelled like a rotting corpse and just couldn't tell. "I've come to offer you a deal," he said as pleasantly as he could manage while trying to surreptitiously sniff himself. He didn't think he smelled dead, but his olfactory sense was doubtless many orders of magnitude less impressive than that of a basilisk. "I would like to offer you a regular supply of food in exchange for your shed skins and some of your venom from time to time."

"I have heard such offers before, Dead One," she said derisively. "They do not last. I give of myself and let puny speakers live and the food stops coming after a short time and I am alone and starving again."

Alioth supposed that made sense as this was a school and most of the people she dealt with were probably students, no longer able to come back after graduation. Or they'd merely gotten enough wealth from what she gave them and didn't bother coming back. No sense in giving these unknown strangers more credit than they perhaps deserved.

"Then what would you wish of me, Lady?" he posed.

"You will take me from these cold stones to where I may hunt," she demanded.

Alioth could see why she and Tom got along. Her idea was an interesting one, though. He wondered how Arcturus would respond if he told him he wanted to bring a basilisk home.

She would need her own habitat, preferably warded to prevent her from wandering out or random humans from wandering in, yet something that would allow wildlife to pass through. Perhaps even something that drew them to some degree or they'd surely learn to avoid that area rather quickly. And perhaps a subterranean den with some warding to warm it slightly. Basilisks were intensely magical creatures and thusly much more capable of enduring cold temperatures than mundane snakes, but that didn't mean that they didn't relish warmth.

"I'll need some time to prepare a place," he admitted.

"Then return when you are ready, Dead One. Not before."

And she slithered back into the open mouth, which slid shut behind her.

Huh. That was interesting. And, honestly, he was kind of mentally jumping up and down in excitement at the picture of Severus' face when he offered the man an unlimited supply of basilisk venom for his potions. Then there was the shed skin. If she was up and eating regularly instead of hibernating most of the time to prevent starving to death, she'd shed once every year. There were literally dozens of uses for the intensely magical shed skin. Everything from armor to clothing to
an ingredient in rituals and some kinds of potions.

Before leaving, he moved the horcruxes to shadowed corners of the chamber - opposite corners, just to be safe – and obscured them with small piles of rodent skeletons. Any magical concealment he could conjure in the next couple of minutes would be as likely to draw attention to the magical energy as to actually prevent notice. No one was likely to expect to find them buried in refuse.

And it tickled Alioth just a bit to do that to Voldemort's horcruxes. He honestly didn't hate the man, nothing close to his feelings for Dumbledore, but he really didn't like him either.

He'd decided to keep the horcruxes and keep his eyes open for any more of them he can pick up without too much difficulty. While he had no immediate plans to kill Voldemort, he wasn’t not ruling it out until Severus told him so. Even if they did decide to let Voldemort live, the horcruxes could be a peace offering or perhaps held hostage against his good behavior. Or maybe both if he gave the man all but one or two.

It was good to keep his options open.

As December approached, Harry continued to make slow but steady progress with his occlumency. So far, they were just working on building memory retention by focusing on building an area of his mind to store his new memories as they came in and then conditioning him to access it without having to stop and meditate. They were also addressing security for his mind to prevent Legilimens from accessing or influencing it. The process was abominably slow, even more so than normal as Harry's mind was resistant to it.

Thinking about it, Alioth wondered if Harry’s resistance to learning Occlumency wasn’t actually a product of his mind attempting to protect itself from Dumbledore’s constant manipulations. His mind and magic may have learned such a crude method of fighting as to sabotage his own attempts at gaining control of it.

He was saving the sorting through old memories and organizing Harry's mind until the boy had better control. There wasn't any point in dredging up that can of worms until Harry was able to understand what it all meant and trust his own conclusions.

Severus had continued to avoid Alioth as much as possible. In class, he called on Alioth when he had no other choice, but he didn't look at him any more than necessary. Between classes, the man was clearly avoiding him. It was an unfortunate situation, but not all that unexpected. Severus really was too noble for his own good, but Alioth didn't regret telling him what he had. He'd needed to put the idea of romance between them into the man's head. With luck, it would stay there and percolate and eventually brew a reciprocal attraction. Alioth knew he'd heard somewhere that the greatest aphrodisiac was knowing that you were wanted. Or something to that effect.

Alioth could wait until after graduation to ask Severus on a date if that was necessary, though he honestly hoped it wouldn't take that long to get the man to speak to him civilly again. Pining was getting rather exhausting when he had virtually no contact with his obsession.

It was on the eve of December that Arcturus came to the school to take Alioth out in order to attend the funeral of his cousin Cassiopeia, the last member of the family from his generation.

"Did you know?" he asked Alioth as soon as they were back in the halls of their own castle.

"Yes and no," Alioth admitted. "I knew that she was dead by the time I became Lord in my time.
No, I never paid enough attention to know exactly when it happened. Were you close? He was trying to be sympathetic here even though he was honestly content to have her gone.

Arcturus waved a hand that wasn't quite dismissive - a little too tense to pull it off, "When we were young. Not so much these last few decades." He sighed and ran a hand over his face, a surprisingly relaxed gesture from the refined man. "She has been managing the family's residential properties for decades. It will take weeks to go through them all and more effort than I care to expend on managing them."

"I could manage them if you wish," Alioth offered. "I've done it before, after all." Honestly, by the time he'd taken them over the first time, they'd been a godawful mess with more than one of them beyond repair. He'd be quite happy to head that off at the pass as much as possible.

Arcturus pursed his lips and gazed shrewdly at Alioth a moment before nodding and giving a more convincing dismissive wave, "Yes, fine. We'll collect her books tomorrow after the funeral. You may rent them out if you wish, but don't sell anything without clearing it with me."

"Okay," Alioth agreed easily. He had no plans to sell anything, anyway. The properties were more valuable in the long term if he retained them and since he planned on being around probably for centuries if not millennia - what with the whole dead but undying thing he had going on - long term investments seemed well worth the effort.

With nothing else to discuss and the funeral not until the following day, Alioth left the older man to his own devices and busied himself with continuing his work on the basilisk's habitat. Arcturus, a true Slytherin, hadn't been able to say no to a basilisk, much less Salazar Slytherin's basilisk, so Alioth had been preparing a thousand acre lot in the wilderness at the back of the property that housed Castle Black. The whole property was already warded away from the muggle world completely as were most old wizarding properties, so that was one less thing to worry about.

The ward schema he'd designed for the outer border wasn't overly complicated but it was labor intensive considering that it had to be applied to a thousand acre border. He had to carve the runes into stones and then plant them ten feet deep every ten meters all the way around the perimeter. Thankfully, the simple design didn't require the wards to be carved without magic as more intricate ones did, so it was fairly fast going. He'd only been able to work on it a few hours at a time thus far, coming by during the night when he wouldn't be missed at the school. His lack of need for sleep was coming in handy, though he did tend to get irritable when he went too long without sleep. He suspected that it was his mind craving downtime that it didn't physically need. With that in mind, he made sure to sleep every third night. He could stay up longer if it was absolutely necessary, but this wasn't that urgent. The basilisk was a thousand years old, after all, he doubted that a few weeks or even months were going to bother her much.

With the undisturbed hours to work, Alioth managed to finish the perimeter by morning and he activated it with the dawn. That just left the den to construct, which wouldn't be that hard, though he would have to brush up on some spells, or maybe put together a new one specific for this purpose. He felt like he should be able to reinforce the tunnel walls by compressing the soil from the tunnel itself into them, but he couldn't recall any existing spell that would do that the way he wanted. Honestly, he figured he should do some research into the science behind reinforcing tunnel walls and use that to create a spell.

Not that he really thought a collapsing den would kill a basilisk this massive – he wasn't going to make it that deep – but it would be embarrassing if he made her a nice home and it collapsed the first time she brushed against the wall. Plus, he wanted it to last her for a long time to come. There was no point in putting so much work into it otherwise.
He skipped lunch in order to make a run to the muggle world – may as well take advantage of his time away from Hogwarts – to pick up some books he needed to craft his spell. He could think of several other uses to which he could apply the spell later, including mining tunnels and basements and hide-outs, so he figured it would be worth the work.

By the time he got back to the castle, he just had time to wash up and dress in fine white funeral robes.

The funeral itself was being held at Cassiopeia’s home, a sprawling cottage on the outskirts of London that was painfully out of place in the increasingly urbanized area. It was very evident that the house was built when London was considerably smaller, and then warded away from the prying eyes of the muggles, who had gone on to obliviously build right around it.

It was Alioth’s first time attending a proper traditional magical funeral as the “Light” side, on whom his friends had always been in the past, didn’t practice that kind of paganism anymore. Honestly, they’d mostly forsaken religion entirely or gave it only a token effort, which was stupid because he’d well learned that it wasn’t as ephemeral in the magical world as the muggle. Though Alioth didn’t know if any of the magical religions in the world were “right”, he knew that there was something greater than humanity out there, even if it was only magic itself. Something that definitely responded to the religious rituals carried out on holidays in a way that felt too positive to be happenstance.

Alioth recognized many of the attendees. The Malfoys were there, though it didn’t appear they’d taken Draco out for the occasion. Just went to show how little loyalty they held toward the Black family, really. Most of the people that he recognized were ones he’d once faced across a battlefield. Some of them he’d killed himself. Some he’d used as sacrifices in some of the rituals that had helped him win in the end.

He decided not to dwell on that. This was a new world and it was entirely likely that these people would never become his enemies at all. If they did – if it was what Severus wanted – Alioth knew that he wouldn’t hesitate to kill them again. Though if he got to know them personally first, he might make an effort to make their deaths quick.

The first two hours of the funeral were exhausting. And considering that he didn’t get tired, that was saying something. Though he’d been “out” in the wizarding world as Arcturus’ heir since starting Hogwarts four and a half years ago, Arcturus really was a shut-in, and that had allowed Alioth to avoid the typical pureblood social events as well. Sadly, that meant that most of pureblood Britain had not yet had a chance to meet him. Everyone seemed to want to talk to him – to get a feel for the future Lord of the Black family. Naturally, because he was born to be a pain in the arse, Alioth made them work for every scrap of insight and then he made them second-guess even that much. He wasn’t going to say that he didn’t find some entertainment in fucking with everyone, but he’d honestly have much rather spent the day at home working on the spells for the basilisk’s den. He’d gotten over his enjoyment of socializing right around the time he’d been abandoned by his best friends for doing what had to be done to save their worthless lives.

Not that he was bitter about it or anything. That would be a terrible waste of his time.

When the socializing portion of the event was at last concluded, they adjourned to the ritual circle that was a permanent part of the spacious back garden of the cottage. The body was lain upon the stone table and surrounded by decoratively wrapped bundles of herbs, which the elves had prepared for the occasion.

Arcturus spoke a long prayer in Latin, asking Mother Magick to take her child back into her bosom and return her to the peace from which all magic was given. It was actually a nice prayer and
Alioth memorized it for future use. Maybe when Harry eventually died – ideally at the end of a long and full life.

When the prayer ended, Arcturus drew his wand and cast an immolation spell upon the table top itself. It lasted less than five minutes and the spells worked into the table kept the fire burning evenly and the smells away from the observers, so it wasn’t unpleasant at all to watch her body break down until nothing but ash remained.

At that point, it was Alioth’s turn to participate. He retrieved the prepared urn from behind the table and held it above the table. The urn was clear. Made of reconstituted diamond dust. With magic, it looked like a massive, urn-shaped diamond. It made him think with some amusement of some future tomb raider finding the Black Family catacombs some day should the wards eventually fail.

He’d chosen to use a silent, wandless spell to complete the ceremony by gathering the ashes seamlessly into the urn. The choice was calculated as a subtle warning to all those in attendance that he wasn’t one to be trifled with. Many of the Dark Sect had rather loose morals. If they thought him weak, they wouldn’t hesitate to crush him at the first available opportunity. The Malfoys, for example, stood to benefit greatly should Alioth suffer a tragic accident.

It was in his interests at this juncture to warn off any such opportunists. He had better things to do than teach abject lessons.

When the funeral concluded, Alioth and Arcturus bid goodbye to the guests, then collected the papers from Cassiopeia’s study and returned to Castle Black. Arcturus went into the catacombs to personally place and ward the urn while Alioth sorted out the papers relating to residential properties and retreated to his personal suite to start sorting through what was honestly a god-awful mess. Alioth strongly suspected that the degeneration of the properties had begun long before Cassiopeia’s death.

In mid-December, Lockhart held his first and ultimately only meeting of the ill-fated Dueling Club. Not only did he get pathetically knocked on his arse right off the bat, but a student was sent to the hospital wing when the first student duel resulted in Draco conjuring a snake, which then promptly bit a bystander rather than attacking Harry because the blonde wasn’t able to control it. The bitten bystander, Justin Finch-Fletchley, humorously enough, was taken to the hospital wing and cured with minimal damage, though he did spend one full day in the infirmary. Alioth couldn’t help but feel slightly vindicated, remembering how ungrateful the brat had been the last time.

For Alioth, it served the purpose of confirming beyond doubt that Harry was not a parselmouth. Alioth honestly hadn’t assumed Dumbledore would have been able to give him such an ability, but it was good to know for certain. Alioth’s command of the language of serpents was not lost when Voldemort died, or, indeed, when Alioth himself had perished, though Alioth’s research had strongly suggested that that was merely because one doesn’t unlearn a language. He’d gained Voldemort’s genetic memory of the language due to the horcrux. If he’d never in his life used the language, perhaps it would have been lost with the horcrux, but using the language incorporated it into his mind and memories and made it a thing independent of that soul shard.

Regardless of the reason, though, he was glad to have it. He’d hardly be in a position to bargain with an ancient basilisk, after all, if not for his parsel talent.

When winter break finally came, Alioth was more than ready to take a holiday. Between Severus’ studious avoidance, Albus infernal meddling, and Harry’s painful struggle with Occlumency, Alioth was glad to get out of the U.K. entirely.
The Black family owned an island in Indonesia, which is where he decided to spend the break as soon as the solstice rituals were completed. The Indonesian property was in desperate need of some tender loving care, which actually helped to pass the time wonderfully in between a little recreational reading and some slightly excessive shopping at the international magical market in Yogyakarta, one of the largest magical markets in the world thanks to lax laws and low taxes.

The house itself was, in true Black style, several times larger than reasonable and almost ridiculously gothic considering it was in the middle of a tropical island. Since Arcturus honestly didn’t seem to care what he did with the properties he was managing, bar selling them, Alioth decided to remodel the place into a more suitable tropical getaway. Any artifacts he removed were stored in the Black vault, and he bought a few new things in the market, but he stripped it down a lot, making it more open and less cluttered. He added a lot more windows and confined the portraits to a portrait hall so they weren’t all over the house. Too many of them had alternate portraits in other places. Too few of them could be trusted to be loyal to him above anyone else. Portraits had their place, certainly, as excellent keepers of family history, if nothing else, but Alioth did not want them watching his every move.

The house elves responsible for the various uninhabited properties, Alioth had dealt with first thing after taking over. As he’d feared, they were being left to rot, like Kreacher, slowly going insane from isolation in the cases of those without other elves or tasks that let them ever make contact with other living souls. The locket, he collected from Grimmauld Place and stored in the island house, deciding that keeping them all together in one place was likely asking for trouble in them either being found or like learning to communicate with each other or something. He really wouldn’t put it past the things.

The trip succeeded, at least, in providing some distraction from his Severus woes, which he was absolutely certain would be sorted in a reasonable matter of time, but that didn’t mean the waiting wasn’t tedious.

And… yeah… lonely.

Meanwhile: Somewhere In Great Britain

Tom Riddle stood naked in front of a stand-up mirror, inspecting the perfection of his body. It had been so long since he’d looked… human. He hadn’t realized that he’d missed it so much. Not that it wasn’t a perfectly acceptable price to pay for immortality, but physical beauty and immortality was considerably better than having to choose. And why should he have to? He was the Dark Lord Voldemort.

That brought him up short and he shrugged back into his dressing gown and crossed the room to his bed.

He had driven fear into the hearts of witches and wizards all across Britain. Made them fear him to the extent that they daren’t even speak his name. Now he wondered if he’d done that because he’d subconsciously been aware of how pathetic a name it was. He’d been a rather ridiculous child when he’d thought up the moniker, after all.

He couldn’t help but grimace as his mind tried to sort through the last several decades. It was so clear now. His mind, that is. Clear in a way it hadn’t been in decades. And his magic… He lifted one hand and concentrated his magic until brilliant orange flame flickered between his fingers and danced upon his flesh. It was harmless to him but would burn anyone or anything else it touched.

It was a trick he’d learned just before starting Hogwarts and one he’d used in school to earn respect
among the purebloods who’d looked down on him.

It was a trick he hadn’t been able to accomplish since he’d created the first horcrux. It was such a trifle… he’d thought nothing of it when it had first slipped beyond his grasp. A mere parlor trick that had no real purpose. It was no loss.

But it had only been the beginning. His magic had grown more difficult to grasp and more tiring to use in his later years – after he’d created more horcruxes. So difficult, in fact, that he’d regressed to using mostly Unforgivables, which were labeled unforgivable because they were some of the simplest Dark Magic to use. Simple enough a child could manage them if he or she had proper motivation and conviction. They weren’t power intensive.

Tom had been losing his magic. And his mind. And he hadn’t even realized it.

It was, quite frankly, terrifying. Possibly more terrifying that Death itself.

The use of the Philosopher’s Stone had saved him, but he suspected only continual use of the Stone would keep his mind and body in proper form.

So, his first order of business was to produce an excess of the Elixir. Enough to last him a good long while should the Stone be lost or stolen. His second task would be to find a way to replicate the Stone. If this was the thing that allowed him to keep his immortality and his mind, he wasn’t going to risk losing it. He’d make a dozen of the things and hide them all over the globe if possible.

Then…

Then he’d recall his Death Eaters. Then he’d get back to furthering his goals for the betterment of the wizarding world.

Okay, and the betterment of himself. He wasn’t Dumbledore. He wasn’t going to pretend that unlimited power and influence wasn’t high on his list of ultimate goals. It wasn’t his only goal, though. Before he’d lost his mind, he’d honestly sought to make things better.

He did regret the loss of Severus. The man had been his most impressive Death Eater on talent alone. Intelligence, a prodigal skill with potions, and one of the best duellers in his Inner Circle. Sadly, he had reason to question the man’s loyalty. He had seemed awfully concerned with Lily Potter’s safety and Tom had failed to spare her. Honestly, though, even had he known for certain of his undying loyalty, Severus was a small price to pay for Tom’s returned sanity and command of his magic.

Still… he belonged to the Black Heir now. Perhaps the boy may be lured into his service, which would give him Severus as well.

Something to consider, but not before he’d unlocked the secrets of the Stone.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I could have done a lot more with this chapter, but I'm trying hard to resist my typical tendency to flush out more details than really necessary, thereby drawing
out the story to epic proportions that I never get around to completing. So, I apologize if there's a lot of "telling" rather than "showing" in this chapter, but I think we all want to see where this goes more than we want every scene written out in detail, right? At least, I do, and let's face it, I matter most in this instance because I'm the author. :D

On a more serious note, thank you all so much for the comments and the sympathy you've offered in this difficult time. It means a great deal to me. I didn't reply to individual reviews much on the last chapter because, frankly, I was too depressed to bother. I did read them all and I greatly appreciated them though. You all helped me to feel much better and inspired me to get this next chapter out so quickly. So, you may consider the timely arrival of this chapter as my sincere gratitude for all your kind words.
Severus leaned against the corridor wall. Dinner time was approaching, which meant that the door across from him should open soon. According to Albus’ spying portraits, Alioth had been meeting with Potter for an hour before dinner every Saturday, apparently for at least two months now and Albus wanted to know what they were doing in there. He’d clearly implied that he’d feared Alioth was trying to turn the boy into a next generation Death Eater, though Severus severely doubted that. Alioth had never tried to be anything less than a Dark Wizard as far as Severus was aware, but he’d never heard the boy say the word “mudblood” nor speak of the Dark Lord like a god as some of his other Slytherins were known to do.

Honestly, from all the knew of the boy, he’d never expect him to end up supporting the Dark Lord. Alioth was too intelligent, too cunning, to let himself become the puppet to a madman. He was much more mature than Severus had ever been in school.

Though Severus did honestly wish that he could force himself to think of the boy as “Black” rather than Alioth. It was an unfortunate habit he’d developed in the boy’s first year. Severus had grown to favor the boy very quickly. He was smart, very mature for his age, talented, and respectful. He was also cunning, resourceful, and reserved. All excellent traits for any Slytherin to possess.

And “Black” had the distasteful tendency to make him think of a certain rabid mutt of his previous acquaintance.

He couldn’t help but wonder though, if he’d been wrong to favor the boy. Surely, he’d encouraged the boy’s apparent infatuation with him. Not that it wasn’t flattering to hear that from one of the smartest students he’d ever taught, who was set to inherit one of the wealthiest and most influential Houses in Britain. He suspected it was largely due to the fact that Arcturus Black was well known for being a recluse and Alioth was kept close to home, giving the boy little enough interaction with the world. And the boy’s maturity doubtlessly meant he had little interest in the hormonal cretins his own age. Severus was likely one of a very short list of mature individuals of his preferred gender that had treated him with any degree of respect in his life. When he thought of it, it was almost expected.

And Severus was certain that the interest would fade soon enough. Alioth was getting older. Surely Arcturus would permit him to interact with a wider range of people soon and Alioth would no doubt transfer his affections to a more appropriate recipient.

And then Severus could go back to being just the boy’s teacher and eventually former teacher.

He sighed faintly and told himself firmly that he wouldn’t miss the attention. He may miss the student, sure. There wasn’t anything wrong with that. But Alioth was not his and never would be. Never could be.

He was eminently relieved when he was saved from thinking about it anymore by the opening of the door he’d been babysitting. He was concealed using a spell of his own creation, something that combined the effects of a disillusionment and a notice-me-not, each aspect compensating for the shortcomings of the other. Nevertheless, he was almost not surprised that Alioth’s eyes met his almost the second he stepped into the corridor. Not once in four and a half years had Severus ever been able to sneak up on that boy regardless of what concealment spells he employed. He could
only guess that he was one of those rare souls inherently sensitive to magic.

Alioth’s eyes held his for only a second before focusing on the boy emerging from the room behind him.

Harry was rubbing at his temple like he had a headache, but he looked happy enough, “Thanks, Alioth,” Harry gave him a small smile. He sighed heavily and added, “See you next week,” before heading down the corridor toward the Great Hall.

Alioth just stood there until the boy turned the corner, then turned to look directly at Severus again.

Caught between being impressed and annoyed, Severus let the spell fall away. This was the first time they’d been alone together since Alioth’s confession and it was making Severus feel more than a little uncomfortable. Not that he was letting that feeling show, of course.

“Sir?” Alioth asked lightly and Severus was again annoyed and impressed by how the boy had managed to act exactly the same after his confession as before. There was no blushing or stuttering or averted eyes as one may expect of a teen facing a crush. That entire conversation might never have happened for how much it appeared to have impacted him.

“Black,” Severus replied, keeping the width of the corridor between them. The last thing he wanted was for the boy to feel in any way encouraged in his ill-advised infatuation. He’d have happily gone on keeping his distance from the boy if not for Albus’ “encouragement” to seek an explanation for what Alioth and Potter were doing with all their time closeted away. “I’ve noticed that you’ve been spending a great deal of time behind locked doors with Potter. Have your affections moved on so quickly?” And damn it! Was he flirting? Fuck, it had clearly been too long since he’d gotten laid if a student confessing a crush was enough to get him flirting with said student. It had come out flat enough to sound more mocking than flirting, but Alioth clearly didn’t take it that way. His smile was small, but his eyes were shining with mirth and happiness.

“Never, sir,” was his immediate response.

Severus resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Teenagers… “Black, I would like an explanation lest I conclude a need to intervene on Potter’s behalf.” And wasn’t that mildly repulsive to voice. Not to say that Alioth’s words at the end of last term hadn’t hit home, because they most certainly had. He had come to the conclusion that Potter was just a child and not actually Potter Sr. incarnate as he’d perhaps envisioned previously. That did not, however, mean that he had to like the brat.

Alioth looked thoughtful for a moment before giving a small sigh. “Harry’s been troubled lately. We’ve been talking.” But as he said it, his eyes flicked briefly to the portrait over Severus’ shoulder and back.

“He is twelve, what could possibly be troubling him? Puberty?” Severus asked nastily. He didn’t like how close Alioth was to Potter. There was something… wrong about it.

Alioth smirked a little in amusement, but then shook his head, “Honestly, professor, I’m certain you’re not ignorant to the difficulties of youth. You’ve been working as a teacher too long to be blind to it. I’ll not share Harry’s confidences, but you can no doubt deduce many of them yourself if you think about it. Fame is a fickle mistress and Harry is just a child.”

Severus swallowed a sigh of frustration. Alioth had a tendency to speak of the other students as though they were at least a decade younger than him rather than a matter of a few years. It was a habit that Severus knew led to Severus himself treating Alioth as more than the rest of the cretins
and that was something that had to stop now. “You are a child, Black,” Severus pointedly reminded him. He could swear he caught an aborted eye roll in response.

A second later, Alioth smiled amusedly, “As you say, Professor. Was that all?”

“No, that was not all,” Severus snapped, irritated with his own reactions to Alioth as much as the younger man – boy – himself. “You expect me to believe that you’ve scheduled an hour every week to talk to Potter about his adolescent drama?”

“What else would it be, Professor?” Alioth asked and damn him if he didn’t look utterly honest and slightly confused. It would have been almost believable had his eyes not flicked away for a fraction of a second again, this time to the portrait over Severus’ other shoulder.

Severus was reasonably certain the boy was deliberately conveying his refusal to speak freely in front of the portraits. Even for a Slytherin the boy was paranoid. One of the boy’s many irritating qualities. “Fine,” he bit out, “Get to dinner.”

“Yes, sir,” Alioth said with an inclination of his head, as always managing to make the two simple words sound like terms of endearment. Severus hadn’t read into that too much until this year. Now he realized the boy had spoken to him like that since his first year. Could the crush go back that far?

He watched the boy start on his way toward the Great Hall, taking a longer route himself, in need of a little time to think before he was under the scrutiny of the entire school.

He’d had a crush on Lily at eleven, he recalled. At ten even, though it was a very childish thing with little resemblance to proper romantic interest. He’d been infatuated with Lily from the first moment he saw her float off that swing in the play park near his house. She’d been beautiful and innocent, all warmth and light and laughter. Everything missing from his home, really.

What could Alioth have seen in Severus to have captured his interest so from such a young age? He certainly wasn’t beautiful or innocent or warm and he made a point to never laugh in company these days – not that he often felt the urge. He was ugly, impatient, sober, and quick to temper. He was intelligent and brilliant with potions. He was a skilled dueler and had a talent for spell creation. But those thing hardly seemed the sort to inspire affection. False affection, perhaps, should one want something from him, but… Well, if that was his plan, he was doing a masterful job of it, what with admitting his affections, and showing them openly, if discretely, but asking for nothing.

He honestly doubted that, though. Alioth was simply too wealthy and too well-connected to need anything from Severus badly enough to warrant such an elaborate and drawn-out seduction. Though, honestly, if he could credit any child with managing such a ruse, Alioth would probably be the one.

The one thought niggling for attention was that if the boy had truly been infatuated with him since his first year, then it wasn’t a passing fancy. It was the kind of affection that could potentially last. Severus wasn’t interested in a sixteen-year-old that was his student, but the boy wouldn’t be a boy forever. A year would see him a legal adult. Two and he’d be a graduate. It probably wouldn’t take too much to encourage the infatuation to linger – even grow over those two years. The only real problem would be if Arcturus had plans for the boy’s future spouse, but Severus wouldn’t be surprised if he did not. The Lord Black was well known for being reclusive and withdrawn, voluntarily eschewing the social events that most of the magical nobility treated as lifeblood. If it worked out, Severus could potentially keep Alioth’s interest into adulthood and perhaps beyond.
It was an absurdly appealing prospect and the very reason Severus had been avoiding the boy. It would be far too easy to manipulate that infatuation to his benefit and he wasn’t sure he could live with himself if he gave in to that temptation. Severus knew that he’d never been a particularly good man. It was how he’d lost Lily’s friendship. How he’d ended up a Death Eater. Growing up in his house, he’d learned to look after himself because he couldn’t count on anyone else. He’d gotten a little too good at looking after himself, even at the expense of others. Of innocents.

Alioth may be less innocent than most of the kids in the school, but that didn’t mean that Severus would allow the boy to be used.

He couldn’t.

It was three days after his confrontation with Severus that the man asked Alioth to remain behind after class. The class was at the end of the day, meaning neither of them had anywhere to be until dinner. His still heart warmed at the fact Severus wanted to speak with him alone, even though he rationally knew that this was more likely about Harry than anything else. He strongly suspected Albus was the only reason Severus had resumed speaking to him, and it did rankle that he owed that to the old manipulator. At least, the old man remained far into the negative in their overall tally as far as Alioth was concerned, so he didn’t let it bother him.

He waited patiently for the room to empty and watched with an internalized frown as Severus hesitated a second before casting his normal locking and silencing charms. The man then stayed at the front of the room as he turned to face Alioth.

“What have you been doing with Potter behind closed doors?” he asked with surprising bluntness. Severus must really be in a bad mood if that was as much effort as he felt like putting into subtlety or finesse. Perhaps Albus was riding him about it. Or, more troublingly, perhaps Severus really didn’t like being alone in a room with Alioth.

Brushing off his insecurities with effort, Alioth gave the question real thought. He knew that he didn’t want to lie to Severus, but telling the truth would be putting Harry in danger. As far as Alioth was aware, Severus still trusted in Albus. There was every chance he would take this information to the old man. If Dumbledore found out, it was possible that he’d react by taking more extreme measures to keep Harry away from him.

Still…

“I am teaching him Occlumency,” Alioth admitted grimly. He’d protect Harry if necessary. He’d kill Albus if that’s what it took. He’d honestly rather that than lie to Severus’ face.

It clearly wasn’t what Severus was expecting as his brow rose fractionally with his surprise before he mastered his face back into neutrality. “And why have you felt the need to do that?” he pressed.

“Because someone has been playing about in his mind,” Alioth sighed, walking around his work station to lean against the front of it, leaving he and Severus yet separated by three meters but with no obstructions between them.

“How do you know that?” Severus inquired, equally grave.

“I’m a Legilmens,” Alioth shrugged.

“You admit to snooping around in his mind?” Severus almost started.

“Off the record,” Alioth said with a small smile, trying to drink the older man in while he could.
Merlin, he hadn’t realized how much he’d actually missed him until he finally had his undivided attention again. It was silly as the man hadn’t actually been that far away most of the time, but when Severus would barely look at him and rarely speak to him directly, it had felt that way. “He’s making progress at occlumency, but it’s slow. Considerably slower than I expected, actually. His mind is a mess.”

“Do you know who has been invading his mind?” Severus pressed.

Alioth nodded slowly, “I have a solid guess, but no proof.”

The older man’s eyes narrowed. “Who?”

“At the beginning of this year I found a compulsion in his mind to distrust Slytherins. Myself particularly. It was… delicate work. Not a brute force compulsion. Something that could have easily been mistaken for a friendship drifting apart had I not been a Legilimens.”

Severus tensed almost imperceptibly, “And who would want to push Potter away from you?”

Alioth gave a graceful shrug, “Someone who wants to control those with influence over him.”

A faint grimace appeared on the professor’s face before he turned away and paced toward the front of the room. Alioth saw him run a hand roughly over his face before turning back. Naturally, by the time he was facing Alioth again, his expression had gone neutral. “Why are you helping Potter?” he pressed. “And don’t tell me you’re sowing a future alliance because we both know you’ve gone beyond that.”

“At first,” Alioth frowned, “I pitied him.”

“The Great Harry Potter?” Severus sneered doubtfully.

Alioth shook his head, “An innocent child forced into an impossible role. A baby didn’t kill the Dark Lord, Professor. He’s not special or exceptional. He’s a little boy who didn’t know magic was real until a month before coming here. He was thrown into a world that had him built up into hero status in their minds, with impossible to achieve expectations thrown at him at every turn. Half the world loving him for saving them, the other half hating him for killing the Dark Lord. It’s like the entirety of Wizarding Britain took leave of their senses to deify or vilify a baby, and poor Harry is stuck disappointing them at every turn because he is just a little boy, like every other one his age.

“I know you have issues with his father, Professor, but you can’t honestly tell me that Harry Potter abuses or even relishes in his fame. It frightens him and embarrasses him.”

Severus turned away again, hiding his face, but also showing an impressive amount of trust in leaving his back to Alioth. Or perhaps he just underestimated his potential threat, but Alioth didn’t think Severus was that naïve.

“After spending more time with Harry, I can admit that I’ve come to like him. Not the most Slytherin explanation, perhaps, but part of the human condition, I believe. I don’t... form attachments easily, Professor. I promised Harry that I would help him, and I will live up to that promise.”

He remained silent for a long time and Alioth used it to just bask in the man’s presence, filling his reserves in case Severus went back to avoiding him after this.

When Severus finally turned back, his face was clear and his posture relaxed, “You’re tutoring
Potter for his lessons in exchange for lessons on the muggle world, of which you are intensely curious but forbidden by your father to explore. I will inform the headmaster.”

Alioth smiled likely more broadly than he had since Severus’ death. Merlin, he loved this man. Knowing how Severus felt about effusive gratitude, he let his smile and his eyes show his appreciation and responded with a simple, “Yes, sir.”

Severus expression grew minutely uncomfortable and he shifted his weight slightly before flicking his wand at the door. “Dismissed, Black.”

Valentine’s Day was perhaps the most ridiculous muggle holiday in existence, Alioth mused as he tentatively entered the decorated Great Hall on the day in question. Granted, most muggle holidays were rather barmy, in his opinion, centering around commercialism rather than any greater meaning. Still, at least most of them did have a greater meaning. Valentine’s Day, if he was remembering one of Hermione’s lectures properly, went back to some Christian saint that used to marry people. Honestly, that was all he remembered. He had no idea why February 14th was significant and only a vague idea that perhaps the Valentine bloke was marrying people that weren’t supposed to be married but loved each other or some such rot. Really, a person should not have to research to learn the meaning behind a popular holiday.

Regardless of the origin of the day, the current iteration of the celebration was pathetic. An excuse to be romantic, a thing that should never require an excuse. If one needed an arbitrary holiday to bother with romance, then did that not take something significant away from the gesture? It made no sense to him and Severus had never approved of the holiday either, so it had been ignored in the short time they’d been together romantically. Not that such frivolity had had any place during the war.

A glance at the head table at last drew a small smile to Alioth’s lips as he observed Severus sneering pure murder at the idiotic peacock preening amidst his nauseating decorations. Remembering that Severus was hating this at least as much as Alioth made him feel a little better. Misery did love company, after all.

Looking toward the Gryffindor table reminded Alioth that Harry was probably hating all of this considerably more than him. The poor boy was practically drowning in pink and red cards, candies, and flowers. He had to swallow a laugh at the look of overwhelmed horror on the boy’s face. Merlin, he was so glad he’d decided to shed his true identity this time around. He did not miss that insanity at all.

He’d only just started his breakfast when an owl flew overhead, dropping a red card in the middle of his plate in the process. Absolutely certain that it wasn’t from Severus for more than one reason, Alioth barely glanced at it before picking it up and very deliberately ripping it in two, then discarding both pieces absently onto the table. If that didn’t make an impact with whatever ignoramus was stupid enough to send him a – no doubt anonymous – Valentine card, he supposed he could burn the next one, but students weren’t supposed to do magic in the Great Hall and he didn’t need a detention. His luck, Lockhart would oversee it and then he might have to kill the fool. Or at least curse him most unpleasantly.

Alioth kept his homicidal urges at bay the rest of the day by finding creative ways to sabotage all of Lockhart’s ridiculous festivities. He charmed the lurid pink flowers all over everything to wilt and shrivel. He modified the confetti falling from the ceiling in the Great Hall to plain gray ash. Lockhart’s bright pink robes, Alioth charmed to randomly grow obscene lengths of lace that made them look not only overly feminine, but managed to keep tripping the man as he attempted to strut
around the school. Finally, he cursed Lockhart himself, causing his hair to keep bleeding into nauseating tie-dye colors that Dumbledore would be proud to wear but the rest of the human race would avoid. Lovely colors such as vomit, bogey, dried blood, pus, and bile. He also confunded every dwarf he happened upon, making it nearly impossible for them to deliver valentines.

At dinner, Lockhart looked decidedly out of sorts, constantly checking his hair in the rounded side of a spoon and twitching when his robes sprouted new lace, cringing at the sight of his wilted flowers and flouted confetti. The best part, of course, was that Lockhart was too incompetent to combat any of these things and the other teachers apparently hated him enough to fail to help him. It was enough to have Alioth smiling faintly as he ate dinner.

It did make him hope that the curse on the Defense position would do something terrible to Lockhart again. The man was a menace and if the curse didn't get him, Alioth was seriously considering perhaps some kind of curse to permanently disfigure the fool. Alioth could tolerate the fraud more easily if half of Wizarding Britain wasn’t swooning over him. Honestly, he wasn’t ugly, but he wasn’t nearly as attractive as he thought he was and the fact that his personality wasn’t enough to negate his physical appeal for the ordinary witch or wizard was truly depressing.

Of course, thinking of the curse got him wondering why Dumbledore hadn’t done anything about it yet. Could the old man feel that he was benefiting in some way from allowing such ignorance in the British population? Surely it wouldn’t be more of a hassle to identify and nullify the curse than it was to find and hire a new Defense teacher every single year.

Dumbledore also allowed severely subpar teaching in Muggle Studies and History of Magic. Why?

Well, Alioth supposed he could understand History. He probably saved a significant amount of the school budget by letting a ghost teach as he surely required no wage – not that that excused generations of wizards with no proper understanding of their own history. Muggle Studies may be a result of Albus’ own ignorance into the subject. He may not even realize how pathetic the class really was.

But why Defense? It had been over forty years, there was no way that Dumbledore hadn’t been able to identify the curse in that time if he’d bothered to look for it. Perhaps he wasn’t able to remove it and was unwilling to admit his failure in order to employ a proper Curse-breaker for the job. That actually sounded like something Dumbledore might do. Gods forbid anyone realize that man wasn’t infallible.

According to Dumbledore himself, Tom Riddle had put the curse in place when he’d been denied a job as Defense teacher the second time, this time by Dumbledore himself. First off, why the fuck had Dumbledore let the man wander around the school unsupervised. He hadn’t trusted him even at eleven years old, so why let a twenty-something Riddle have unsupervised access to the school, even when there weren’t any students present.

Pretty stupid, really.

That’s when he’d supposedly hidden the diadem as well. Another excellent reason to escort him to and from the gate.

But, whatever. Dumbledore had never made much sense in the things he did.

The real question was if Alioth could perhaps find and remove the curse in a reasonable amount of time. Between lessons, helping Harry, readying the basilisk’s habitat, and managing the residential properties for the Black family, Alioth did not have an excess of free time at his disposal with
which to search for a curse. Logically, however, for the curse to have lasted fifty years without
losing potency, it had to be connected either to the castle wards themselves, or a living magical
being that spent a lot of time in or around the school. Though it might make sense to be
Dumbledore himself, Alioth rather doubted a twenty-something Riddle would have been able to
place such a powerful curse on Albus while the man was watching him suspiciously.

Also, something that long lasting would likely require a ritual involving Albus’ blood and Alioth
really doubted that.

Which meant that it had to be connected to the ward schema. The school sat directly on a major
ley line, which gave a lot of power to the wards and the rest was absorbed via the constant excess
of magical energy expended by the residents of the castle, which is why the wards were considered
the strongest in Britain. They weren’t necessarily the best, but the power behind them was such
that they were nearly impossible to penetrate from the outside. Voldemort had done so at one point
during the war, but that was because he’d compromised them from within…

Which was another reason Alioth needed to check on the wards. Now that he thought of it, it was
likely that Voldemort had compromised the wards at the same time he’d left the curse behind.

Huh. Interesting.

So, he just had to find the ward room, which shouldn’t be difficult. His magical sensitivity would
make it easy enough to follow the flow of magic within the school to wherever it was the wards
originated. There was a spell to accomplish that as well, but Alioth hadn’t needed it since he’d
died. Magic felt differently to the undead considering they were magical beings, animated entirely
via magic.

Alioth waited until after curfew that night, when he was supposed to be patrolling, then begin
following the magic. It took him over an hour since the magic didn’t follow the corridors and he
often found himself backtracking to find the right corridor to take him where the magic wanted to
lead. Eventually, he found himself deep in the bowels of the castle, far beyond where the students
ever tread.

The ward room itself took his breath away. It wasn’t so much a room as a hall. A massive,
cavernous, multiroom hall. Literally every centimeter of it covered in runes.

This… was going to take awhile.

Unfortunately, Severus had gone back to avoiding Alioth after their meeting about Harry. He
hadn’t been quite as bad as before. He treated him more normally in class and Alioth didn’t notice
him turning corners in the corridors to avoid passing him, but he still kept his distance. In the past,
it wasn’t uncommon for Severus to happen upon him in a quiet corridor and stop for a chat. Now,
Severus no longer stopped. He used to sometimes take a few minutes after class to discuss a potion
Alioth had brewed. He’d stopped doing that as well. It was exasperating, but not surprising.
Alioth chose to focus on the fact that it was progress, even if a small one.

Today, Alioth had been in light spirits since waking because today was Alioth’s Career Counseling
meeting with Severus. The opportunity to talk to Severus one-on-one again was appealing enough
that Alioth had spent the past two weeks eagerly anticipating it. When he finally arrived at the
man’s office, he had to pause a moment to school his face into something less than stupidly giddy
delight. Severus knew that Alioth had a thing for him, but he didn’t need to act like a besotted
teenager.
Even if he technically was.

When he was reasonably certain that he looked pleasantly neutral, he knocked lightly.

“Enter,” came the smooth drawl from within.

Alioth’s heart hadn’t beat in something like seventeen years, but he could swear he still felt a strange flutterly thing in that general vicinity and he sternly told himself to pull it together as he opened the door to Severus’ office.

The inside hadn’t changed at all and logically, it had only been like three months, so that wasn’t surprising, but somehow he felt like something should mark the fact that he hadn’t been here in what felt like ages.

Merlin, but having Severus so close and yet so far was a bitch.

He pushed his thoughts far to the back of his mind and smiled pleasantly at Severus as he closed the door behind him and felt the expected locking and silencing charms falling into place. “Good afternoon, sir,” he greeted amicably as he moved to take a seat in front of the man’s desk.

“Black,” Severus nodded neutrally. “Do you know that you plan to do after graduation?” he asked directly.

“Well, my father is thinking of stepping down as Lord of my House shortly after my graduation. He’ll be ninety-four and he’s tiring of the day-to-day minutia of managing the House,” which was, incidentally, true. He hadn’t even pressured the old man as he hadn’t cared all that much about whether he attained the Lordship on graduating or ten or twenty years down the road. He still had access to the vaults and the properties, so it didn’t seem to matter much. Alioth suspected the man wanted to see how Alioth chose to run the House to content himself that he’d made the right choice before he died. “Taking up those duties will doubtlessly take up a lot of my time.”

“I see,” Severus pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Is there anything beyond that that you’re interested in doing?”

“Well, my father is thinking of stepping down as Lord of my House shortly after my graduation. He’ll be ninety-four and he’s tiring of the day-to-day minutia of managing the House,” which was, incidentally, true. He hadn’t even pressured the old man as he hadn’t cared all that much about whether he attained the Lordship on graduating or ten or twenty years down the road. He still had access to the vaults and the properties, so it didn’t seem to matter much. Alioth suspected the man wanted to see how Alioth chose to run the House to content himself that he’d made the right choice before he died. “Taking up those duties will doubtlessly take up a lot of my time.”

“I see,” Severus pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Is there anything beyond that that you’re interested in doing?”

“Well, I don’t know that I’ll pursue it as a career, but I’ve something of a passion for spellcrafting,” Alioth admitted.

Severus’ brow rose in surprise. “Have you had any success with it so far?”

“Oh, yes. Quite a bit, actually,” Alioth smiled, reveling in the way interest replaced wariness in Severus’ eyes. “I created a spell to take notes for me in class. It’s actually far superior to the established charms because it doesn’t take down every bit of speech it picks up, but rather focuses on one to five people designated at the time of casting. It can, however, include answers to questions that the professor asks in the course of a lecture to ensure nothing is missed.”

Severus’ black eyes burned with intellectual curiosity as he leaned forward a bit over his desk, “However did you manage that?”

Alioth smiled and conjured a blank page of parchment and found a self-inking quill in his pocket. He leaned forward over the desk and began roughly sketching out the arithmancy that went into the spell. After a minute, Severus rose and came around the desk so that he could better see, asking questions intermittently, which Alioth eagerly answered.

Discussion of that spell led into another that Alioth had crafted to search books for key words and phrases. The inferior spell would temporarily highlight each such instance in a book, while the
superior would actually copy the relevant passages and the sections in which they could be found onto a parchment, making review of them considerably easier. This was actually a spell that he’d created shortly after Severus’ death when he was combing the Black library for anything that could possibly bring the man back to him. Another spell in this family allowed him to scan for keywords or phrases in multiple books at one time. It could do one large bookshelf at a casting. With refining, he supposed he could tweak it to cover more without a ridiculous expenditure of magic, but he hadn’t really found it necessary so far.

At some point, Severus pulled up a second chair and settled in close at his side so that they could better view the parchment together. Severus actually had some suggestions to modify the spells for alternate uses or increased efficiency and Alioth ended up digging a journal out of his pocket to note them down. The conjured parchment would probably last a few days, but it would eventually break down as all but the most complex conjurations always did.

Seeing the journal seemed to pique Severus’ curiosity though, and Alioth soon found himself explaining some of the other things he had in the journal, such as the plans he had in the works for the subterranean tunnel spell. Severus seemed both surprised and fascinated when he saw the calculations Alioth was working from the muggle reading he’d done. The spell had turned out to be much more intensive than he’d initially thought. He’d known that there was more to digging underground structures than simply digging, but he hadn’t realized just how much. Of course, magic made everything much easier than the muggles had it, but their basic rules and guidelines proved invaluable for him.

The spell had actually become multipart. The first part determined the composition of the area he wanted to dig, reading exactly what kind of material it was and where any cracks or faults lay. The second part mapped out the ideal geography of an underground tunnel or room to take best advantage of the natural layout. This part he could adjust based on what he wanted, but the spell would tell him the weak points. The third part was actually physically tunneling. This was rather power-intensive, and most people would probably need a casting circle to manage anything more than small sections of a narrow tunnel at a time. It became exponentially more difficult the deeper one wished to tunnel, so it would definitely need some work before it would be appropriate for anything more than forty or so feet underground.

Basically, the spell worked by compressing all the soil or stone from the area one wanted to open into the walls. This meant that there was no detritus to remove, but it was also a lot more work than simply scooping out the material. Existing tunneling spells did the latter, basically a magical means of doing what the muggles had to do by hand. Alioth’s spell was harder, but better. It would require no supports because the compressed material would provide that support. When the spell was complete, Alioth hoped that the three parts would be able to work together to ensure that the spell could do all the necessary calculations, applying the support needed where it was needed as he went.

Severus looked completely blown away by this spell, which was many magnitudes more complex than the study-related spells Alioth had shown first.

It was around that time that Severus glanced at the clock and did an actual double-take before evidently realizing how close he’d been sitting to Alioth. He rose quickly and returned the chair to its rightful place before moving swiftly back to his seat behind the desk.

It had been a little more than two and a half hours.

Alioth did his best to smother a smile as Severus resumed his proper seat. Merlin, he’d missed this. Of course, the last time they’d done it, they’d been discussing the ritual that had killed
Severus in the end, which had left a rather sour taste to the whole experience, but this had certainly gone a long way toward reestablishing it as a positive in Alioth’s mind.

“Do you know what classes you plan to pursue in your NEWTs?” he asked as though he hadn’t just gotten distracted for over two hours discussing spellcrafting with a student.

“Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, of course,” Alioth replied, deciding that letting Severus pretend that that hadn’t happened would be the easiest way to go forward without pushing him further away. “Potions, Transfigurations, Charms, and Astronomy, I believe. Defense class in this school is a joke, as is History. Care and Herbology I feel I’ve learned enough to suit me.”

Severus nodded a bit as though he couldn’t disagree on any particular point. “Very well. As you’ve consistently achieved Outstanding on your exams in every class, I can see no reason why you should have any difficulty attending whichever classes you choose. Is there anything in particular you wish to discuss about your classes or what happens after graduation?”

“No, sir,” Alioth dismissed. If they didn’t hurry, they wouldn’t make it to dinner. Not that he’d mind missing the meal, but Severus was too skinny to skip meals, and he didn’t need to give Albus any reason to wonder about their joint absence. So far, he’d had no reason to assume that Dumbledore had gained any inkling as to Alioth’s true purpose with Harry in their weekly meetings, so it was clear that Severus had kept his confidence despite his continued avoidance. Not that Alioth was surprised by this. Severus had ever been a man of his word in Alioth’s experience.

“Then you’d best get to dinner, Mr. Black,” Severus stood, brushing away imaginary wrinkles in his robes, which were no doubt charmed to repel them. “We both had,” he observed, extending a hand toward the door in invitation.

“Thank you, sir, for your input on my spells,” Alioth offered as he stepped out into the vacant corridor. “I don’t usually have anyone to discuss such things with. It was fun.”

Severus grimaced faintly, but gave a small nod, “Good evening, Black,” was all he said before taking the lead down the corridor, his brisk stride quickly taking him beyond the sight of Alioth and his more leisurely pace.

He let himself smile a little as he replayed the meeting in his mind all way the through dinner.

It took a month to find Riddle’s additions to the wards schema. It was subtle and it was spread over a six meter section of the room. Alioth could only guess that Riddle had come down here as a student and used the memory to plan out exactly what he wanted to do when he returned. It wasn’t surprising that he would assume Dumbledore would refuse him the position, so it made sense that he’d come prepared to do this. The alterations were very small and spread out so that individually, they didn’t really do anything, but combined as they were, they became insidiously effective.

The wards had initially been created to recognize the professor of each subject that had then existed in order to give him or her some authority over the wards and the school itself. The modifications caused the magic of the wards themselves to saturate the individual who held the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor. This magic would find a way, over the course of the year, to force the professor from the position. Alioth extrapolated that if one was predisposed to leave for any reason, the magic would drive them to it. If they were not prepared to leave of their own volition, it would get more dangerous. Alioth had looked it up out of sheer curiosity in late March and found that, since Professor Merrythought retired in 1945, not one professor had lasted more than one year in that position. Of those forty-six professors, eight had died either near the
end of the year or over the summer following, ten had been maimed in some way that prevented
them from continuing, and eight had been dismissed for some reason. The remaining twenty had
left on their own for one reason or another.

Honestly, anyone who didn’t believe in the curse was either ignorant, idiotic, or both.

As to why Dumbledore hadn’t fixed the problem, that could owe to the fact that doing so was
anything but a simple process. Alioth had spent the last two months working an average of
fourteen hours a week figuring out how to safely undo what Riddle had done. He hadn’t been able
to spare more time than that as he’d been determined to get the basilisk out of the school before the
end of term and then there were his OWLs, which weren’t really difficult, but did require some
study in some areas that he hadn’t touched on it a decade or two.

It wasn’t as simple as removing the additions because the wards were too intricate to change any
part of the runes with magic. It had to be done entirely by hand. But one could not remove marks
carved into stone without magic unless one cut the rune out completely and shaped it anew. This
necessitated removing a part of the ward schema for the time it took to carve it again. With a runic
array this expansive, that kind of thing could destabilize the entire thing and bring it crashing
down, possibly bringing considerable damage to the entire structure or even disrupting the magic
holding some of the less physically reasonable architecture in place.

In short, it was dangerous. Incredibly so.

Perhaps that was why Dumbledore hadn’t been brave enough to attempt it. Or perhaps he simply
hadn’t thought of the solution that Alioth had. The fact that the man was old and experienced did
not necessarily mean that every solution would come to him before someone younger and perhaps
less experienced.

Alioth had carved the original runes as they were meant to be onto small stone tiles. From there,
he carefully moved the wards from the altered runes onto the tile runes, one at a time, then
removed and corrected the originals. This allowed the wards to remain stable, though it did
provide weak points that would make the whole more vulnerable to penetration if he left them that
way. As it was, he did one at a time, leaving the wards weakened only for the hour it took to
remove the old rune and carve it anew. Doing two or three a day, it took him the better part of two
weeks, leaving him finishing the final three runes the day before the end of term.

Alioth had taken care to avoid attracting attention to his trips down to the ward room, but after
coming so many times over such a period of time, perhaps he shouldn’t have been surprised that
someone noticed.

And, of course, it would be Severus. The man was entirely too curious for his own good, though
Alioth knew that was largely self-preservation. Knowing exactly what was going on around him
helped him to make sure no one was preparing to stab him in the back, after all.

So, he was halfway through the final rune when he felt Severus enter the room and start toward
him. The man was magically hidden, as he often was when skulking about looking for some
unsuspecting student to terrorize.

Alioth carefully stepped back from his work when Severus neared, not wanting to risk a miss
stroke with the chisel because Severus managed to surprise him.

Severus faded back into sight as Alioth turned to look at him, an effect that Alioth recognized as a
spell of Severus’ personal creation. The man looked much stonier than usual and his hand was
hovering close to his sleeve where he kept his wand. “Mr. Black. Kindly explain to me what you
are doing to the wards?”

“Fixing them,” Alioth said plainly. Now wasn’t the time to be coy. “There have been forty-seven different Defense professors in this school in the last forty-seven years. I suspected a curse that powerful had to be anchored into the wards themselves, and I was right. Someone modified the wards rather expertly in order to turn the magic of the school itself against the individual holding the title of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“You mean to say that you claim to have removed the curse on the Defense post?” Severus asked with some doubt.

Alioth nodded, “Nearly. I’m completing the last rune now.”

“And how do I know you’ve not just compromised them instead?”

Alioth’s eyes narrowed. “Can’t imagine why I’d want to do that. Hogwarts houses a considerable portion of Magical Britain’s future each year. The last thing I’d want to do was compromise it. But, by all means, don’t take my word for it. You can have a look yourself.” He fished around in his pocket and came out with a small roll of parchment. “This is what they looked like when I got here. The changes I’ve made are fairly obvious as I was forced to remove the original runes entirely and start over.”

Severus eyed him for a moment before accepting the parchment and studying it. After a couple of minutes, he moved to examine the walls, floor, and ceiling where the changes had been made.

Alioth leaned against a column and waited while Severus studied the work for long minutes.

“How did you know how to do this?” Severus finally asked. “This is leagues beyond NEWT Runes, much less OWL.”

Alioth could only shrug. “Runes are interesting and extremely useful, and my father’s library is extensive. I’ve been toying with them for years. I’ve been working on this most of this term and I’ve done a lot of extra reading to figure it all out. I’m not going to try to pretend that it wasn’t difficult, but it wasn’t impossible.”

“Black,” Severus bit out, annoyed, “Why, precisely, do you think this curse has been in place for forty-seven years if fixing it was so ‘possible’?”

“Well,” the real challenge was in fixing them without compromising the wards in the process. I kind of figured it hadn’t been fixed because no one could figure out how to do that.”

“And how did you solve that problem?” Severus grated.

Alioth wondered if the older man had been asked to consult on the problem at one point. He seemed to be taking it personally that Alioth had solved what no one else had been able to in so long. “Well,” he gestured toward the stone tile sitting on the floor next to the last rune he’d been working on. “I just transcribed the proper runes onto stone tiles like that and adjusted the wards to use that in place of the old one. Then I fixed that one and moved the wards back.”

Severus stared at him stonily for a long moment before flatly repeating, “You just ‘adjusted’ the wards.”

Alioth nodded slowly.

“Am I to take it by your blasé attitude that you don’t actually realize how impossible a feat that
“Is?” he pressed.

Alioth’s brow furrowed uncertainly at that and he thought it over, looking for which part was supposed to be so hard. Not that it was easy, of course, but it was really just a matter of holding it very carefully while it was moved so that it didn’t slip or tremble…

“Oh,” he muttered as he made sense of it. What he’d done wasn’t overly difficult, if a little care intensive. But it was power intensive. With a ward schema this big, the vast majority of everyone would find it impossible without a casting circle and a casting circle would make this kind of delicate job impractical as it would be far too easy for the individuals to accidentally work against each other, resulting in not only jarring the wards, but possibly dropping them entirely, which could result in that catastrophic collapse that he’d worked to avoid.

*That* was the real reason that Dumbledore hadn’t done anything about the curse in almost fifty years. He hadn’t been powerful enough.


Alioth sighed, knowing what Severus wanted. Alioth wouldn’t be able to keep his magic neatly contained while he moved the wards back into place. In class, their spells used such a ridiculously small portion of his magic that it had never been a problem, but there would be no way to conceal just how much magic he had in this.

Had it been anyone but Severus, Alioth might have stunned and obliviated them, but he didn’t really have all the much desire to keep this from Severus anyway. So, with a sigh, he went back to work. It was delicate work and it took him almost twenty minutes to finish carving the rune with the tiny chisel and hammer. When he was ready at last, he carefully reached out with his magic, studiously ignoring Severus’ presence as he couldn’t afford any distractions. He gently slid the ward schema back into its rightful configuration and released it with a sigh as he felt it settle properly into place as it was meant to be without the ward or weakness Riddle had emplaced.

When he looked up again, he blinked in surprise at the look of bewilderment on Severus’ face. It wasn’t an expression that he could ever remember seeing there before.

“Sir? Are you okay?” he asked warily, pocketing his tools and the now useless stone tile.

The question seemed to shock the man out of whatever stupor he’d been in and his face cleared back to wary scrutiny, “I will be inspecting your work in more detail over the summer, Black,” he warned. “If I find anything out of place, I will be alerting the school board and you may face expulsion for tampering here. It was extremely dangerous, but it seems you cannot be taught to bring your concerns to an adult in a better position to handle it.”

Alioth just smiled a little at the man’s blustering. Not that he didn’t have a point, but they both knew that no adult affiliated with the school could have handled it or it would have been done decades ago. The fact that the man wasn’t taking him directly to the headmaster suggested that he either trusted Alioth, mistrusted the headmaster at this juncture, or more likely, both to some degree.

So, he just gave an enigmatic, “I’ll work on it, sir,” and saw himself out and back to his dorm. It was late by now and come morning he had to pack up as the train was leaving right after breakfast.

*Chapter End Notes*
Wow, another chapter already. Weird, huh? Don't expect another one this quickly. I had this completely plotted in a scene-by-scene outline and was inspired enough by all your lovely comments that I literally spent all day writing this. I'm also working on Power of a Well-Organized Mind right now, so that might be the next one updated. Unless my muse gets excited about one of the other ones. Who knows.
Alioth spent the ride back to London dozing in his compartment. The door was locked and warded as he really didn't like sleeping around people he didn't trust, which was almost everyone. He wasn't actually tired of course, because he didn't get tired, but he thought he deserved a bit of sloth after the way he'd spent the last few months. Fixing the wards had been an extremely time-intensive problem that had involved a lot of elicit trips to Castle Black in the dead of night to do research, and many hours spent staring at walls, floors, and ceilings covered in runes until his eyes had gone blurry and runes danced behind his eyes every time he closed them. And then there were OWLs and tutoring Harry and managing Black properties that had been neglected for years – damn Cassiopeia, that lazy old biddy.

So, yes, Alioth figured he deserved a few hours of pure, indulgent laziness.

He was feeling pretty good about fixing those wards. Even if he wasn't taking any more Defense classes, that curse had put an enormous handicap on the British wizarding public. Really, the reason the Defense professors seemed to be getting worse, is probably because they were. The people willing to take the position now were the ones who'd been through Hogwarts when the curse was in effect, meaning they'd had no decent Defense education. Alioth didn't want to imagine what the country would look like in fifty or a hundred years had the trend continued. As it was, he recalled his first sixth year, when Fred and George had made a killing on items that could be worn that would shield the wearer because most of the wizarding public couldn't cast a simple shield charm to save their lives – literally.

Thankfully, the curse had done its job one last time, ensuring that Lockhart wouldn't be the first professor to last more than a single year. Had that happened, Alioth would have killed the fool. But, as he'd expected, the curse worked slowly. By the time he'd started removing the curse, it had already done its work. At the Leaving Feast, Lockhart had announced his intention to do some world traveling. Apparently, as much as he loved teaching, a man of his talent was needed by the world at large to help them in their times of peril.

The man was ridiculous.

He'd also announced that he was writing a new book, though he was coy about the topic or title and merely advised people to look out for it in the fall. As disgusting as Alioth honestly found him, he didn't quite want to bother with murdering or maiming him at the moment. As long as the fool stayed far from Alioth, he'd be safe enough for now.

That didn't mean he was ruling it out in the future, but he had more important things to worry about right now.

Like the miniaturized basilisk sitting in stasis in his pocket.

A basilisk's hide was impervious to most spells, which had made the transport considerably more complicated than it would have been had he been trying to transport a thestral, say, as they were only marginally resistant. In order to work his spells on her, he'd needed to first apply a potion to her hide, which made him very glad he spoke her language as he'd not have liked to try that without knowing she understood and approved. He painted the potion in even stripes all down her body and it allowed his spells to take hold when he cast them on her. First, he put her into stasis,
meaning she neither aged, nor experienced anything until the stasis was removed. Then, he bound her into a palm-sized idol of a basilisk that he'd purchased in a shop in Knockturn.

And that had all been before breakfast, which was part of the reason he felt entitled to a nap.

After flooing back to Castle Black, Alioth chose to deal with the basilisk first. While it was true that she wouldn't notice if he waited a few days, much less a few hours, Alioth just felt obliquely uncomfortable with a twenty-meter-long, thousand-year-old serpent in his pocket. Call it a character flaw.

Before restoring her, Alioth took the time to travel down into the burrow he'd made for her. At the lowest level of it, just off the main chamber, he'd created a just human size passage into a small room. In the room, he'd placed a collection of Dark Arts books, all of which had copies in the castle, because he didn't intend to come here often. Among these books, Alioth placed the diary horcrux, which he'd collected that morning. The chamber at Hogwarts was a fine hiding place for everyone but Tom Riddle really, and Alioth figured half the job was in hiding them, so somewhere less obvious wouldn't be amiss. Only Arcturus even knew this den existed whereas most of Britain had heard the tale of the Chamber of Secrets, even if it hadn't gotten quite as much press this time as in Alioth's first time through. Alioth was pretty certain that Dumbledore knew where the entrance was as well, even if he couldn't get it open. As for Riddle, well, he'd taken over Hogwarts in Alioth's previous future. Should that happen again, leaving anything in the Chamber would be as good as handing it over to him.

When he was ready, he procured the idol and cast the spell to restore the basilisk, who he'd learned that morning was named Ahsura, which was Parseltongue for "little female" or "little one" ironically enough. Alioth supposed Salazar must have named her right after she hatched and basilisks grew so slowly that she'd likely never been that large before the man disappeared from Britain after his disagreement with the other founders. Still, it was an amusing name for a beast that could swallow him without bothering to unhinge her jaw. Ahsura didn't seem to find any humor in it though, so he'd very carefully not laughed.

Once he had her restored, he gave her half an hour to explore her new territory including the den. When she was satisfied, she allowed him to milk her venom into two smallish glass jugs. She produced a little over a liter, which she should be able to provide about once a month. Merlin, Britain wasn't going to be able to handle a steady influx of this much basilisk venom. It was so rare and expensive, that it just wasn't that commonly used. He'd definitely have to market this internationally. That or stockpile it. He could fill a small pool with it and use it to dispose of his enemies, he supposed, but it seemed like that might be overkill when a few illegal spells could do the job just fine. Or he could just feed them to the basilisk now residing on the property.

With the venom carefully stored in a specialized expanded bag in his pocket, Alioth started back to the castle, making a mental note on the way to add some fertility warding to the property to help the local wildlife to reproduce more quickly. It really wouldn't do for Ahsura to decimate her food source within a few months, which he suspected she was capable of doing now that she had a fresh food source and the ability to properly hunt after spending what he suspected was her entire life in the Chamber. It was a little sad, actually, and it made him glad that he'd gotten her out of there. Even if she'd gotten regular deliveries of live food, her instincts were to hunt her own food.

Upon returning to the castle, Alioth was surprised when an elf invited him to join Arcturus for dinner in the informal dining hall. He and Arcturus didn't generally have that much contact, despite spending the summers in the same house and Alioth's frequent illicit trips back during the nights to work on Ahsura's new home. He certainly hadn't been expecting the man to want to see
him so soon after his return. Still, he was Arcturus' heir and he had no real reason to want to avoid
the man, so he told the elf he would be along shortly and took just a brief detour to his rooms to put
away the venom and his trunk.

The informal dining room was really only informal in comparison to the formal dining room. It
had a table to seat ten and plenty of impressive finery from the hand-carved dining set to the
sapphire encrusted, gold accented dinnerware and the diamond chandelier.

The Blacks really were disgustingly rich.

What Alioth really liked about this room over the formal dining room, apart from the much smaller
table, was the lack of portraits on the walls. The dining room was hung to the fifteen-foot ceilings
with portraits of various Blacks dating back hundreds if not thousands of years. It was creepy to
Alioth to sit and eat with that many eyes on him, even if they were painted ones. This room,
instead of portraits, was decorated with a mural of a forest that could easily have been the
Forbidden Forest for how dark and old it appeared.

Alioth took the seat adjacent to Arcturus' seat at the head, which was the only other one with a
place setting and where he usually sat when they actually shared a meal. Alioth often took his in
the library or his sitting room or the veranda when the weather was nice, so they didn't end up
eating together all that often.

Arcturus nodded a hello and they ate in silence. It wasn't until they'd finished that Arcturus finally
spoke, pausing to wipe his mouth with his napkin before placing it on his plate. The second he
pushed the plate away, it vanished down to the kitchens. He took a sip of his wine and began,
"What are your plans for the summer?"

Alioth tilted his head slightly in curiosity at the question, but didn't hesitate to answer, "I thought
I'd see to remodeling, or possibly restoring, if necessary, some of the Black properties outside
Britain. Many of them are really in very poor condition, depending on how well the elves were
doing without guidance. From what I've gathered Cassiopeia hadn't done anything with regard to
their management in close to a decade. Some were inhabited for part of that time, but when the
owners died or the rental period expired, she just left them to sit. Some of the house elves were
even beginning to go insane if they were alone on the property."

Arcturus sighed tiredly and sipped his wine again, "When one grows old and weak, it can be
difficult to keep up with everyday minutia, and time can pass more quickly than we notice."

Alioth nodded to accept the reasoning and decided not to mention that she should have passed the
duty on if she didn't feel up to doing it anymore. It wasn't like he'd ever been in the position
himself, so he supposed he couldn't properly judge. It just seemed terribly irresponsible to let the
house elves waste away and hundreds of millions of galleons worth of property go to seed because
she was tired and lazy. If it no longer mattered to her, her family should have still mattered enough
for her to want to preserve the properties or give someone else the chance to do so at least. Still, he
knew that Arcturus had cared for the woman at one point, he didn't figure there was truly anything
to be gained by arguing her negligence. What was done was done, after all.

"Will you be seeing Potter again this summer?" Arcturus asked next.

"Yes, I planned to take him with."

Arturus raised an eyebrow at that, "His guardian must not like him much."

"They really don't," Alioth smiled dryly. "They won't miss him and I'm certain heshan't miss
them."

"Very well," Arcturus allowed. A minute of silence passed as the house elves delivered an after-dinner coffee in diamond and platinum goblets. The silence stretched as they fixed it to their liking, Arcturus with a splash of cream and Alioth black with a spoonful of sugar. "There are... whispers," Arcturus said at last. "Of Dark Marks awakening." He watched Alioth closely as he said it, clearly trying to read his reaction.

Alioth just nodded, "I suspect he may have been back for some time already," he admitted. "He gained the Philosopher's Stone more than a year ago."

Arcturus stilled at this news. "The Philosopher's Stone? I wasn't aware it had been stolen."

Alioth nodded, "It was entrusted to Dumbledore during my fourth year. I can't imagine why the Flamel would be foolish enough to do such a thing, but they did. The old man used it in his gambit to force a confrontation between Harry and Voldemort. I intercepted it and bartered it to the Dark Lord in exchange for Severus' slavery bond."

Arcturus silently sipped his coffee for a minute, watching Alioth pensively, "The Philosopher's Stone for ownership of a single man," he said at last.

"Ownership of Severus," Alioth corrected, "Your future son-in-law."

Arcturus brow shot up again at that. They'd never actually discussed Severus as it hadn't been pertinent to their arrangement and Alioth was not some swooning school girl and saw no reason to regale all and sundry with his amorous intentions. Still, it seemed like it might be prudent, at this point, to make sure the man knew Severus belonged to him in every way that mattered.

"We never explicitly discussed it," Arcturus said after a pause to absorb that information, "but I had assumed your promise to honor the House of Black included your intention to be sure it didn't go extinct. You do have plans to procreate at some point, I hope." There was a hint of steel beneath the words that assured this point was non-negotiable.

Alioth waved off the concern. "Of course. Just because my life has no obvious expiration date does not mean I'm arrogant enough to assume my existence is actually permanent or that the Black family should dwindle to me alone. I've always wanted a family, though I'll admit that immortality does put it in something of a different perspective. Perhaps vampirism will appeal to my children..." He mused. He knew, intellectually, that it would be difficult to outlive his children, even if they lived full and happy lives, but he suspected that he couldn't presently imagine just how difficult.

"And that is... possible... for you," Arcturus ventured delicately, breaking him from his thoughts. "Procreation, I mean."

"Well, not in the traditional sense, I don't think," Alioth mused. He'd given this cursory thought before, but he hadn't actually stopped to work it all out. "It may be possible with the right potions. If I've managed to age my body relatively naturally, it stands to reason that I could produce the... let's say 'proper ingredients' to create an embryo." The idea of having true, biological children with Severus was somewhat intoxicating, but he wasn't sure if it would be possible. If anyone could invent the necessary potion though, it would be Severus. "If that doesn't work, I'm absolutely certain that I could manage a blood adoption, which is nearly as good," he dismissed. "There are plenty of orphaned magical children in the world, particularly abandoned muggleborns that I'm sure we'd have no difficulty locating an infant or toddler with a sufficient magical core to justify passing on our legacy. Or Severus could always produce a child with a surrogate and I could blood..."
adopt it afterward.

"Worry not, Lord Black, your family shall continue to thrive for many, many years to come."

Arcturus clearly tried to hide it, but Alioth could see his shoulders relax fractionally with the assurance. He wondered how long the man had been fretting over this and hesitating to bring it up. There really wasn't a whole lot he could have done had Alioth refused to procreate, though he supposed the man likely would have seen to creating a few children with his own seed if that was the case. This family meant everything to him and seeing it so reduced had been killing him as surely as that old curse. Alioth suspected that he'd brought hope with his promises, and that had likely done as much toward his recovering health as the actual cure itself.

He was okay with that, really. He didn't want to see the Potter line die out either. He supposed he'd have to bring that up with Harry at some point. He was fine with Harry's future children carrying on the Potter line, honestly, though he'd have to insist on a blood ritual with any to carry the Potter name. He didn't want the family to entirely lose their actual bloodline.

After that, Arcturus clearly seemed to have discussed everything he'd wanted to discuss, so Alioth excused himself. He'd really missed the library at Castle Black over the summer, even if he had stopped by to borrow books from time to time. It wasn't the same as having leisure to browse for whatever he could find of interest. He didn't plan to remain in the castle long, so he figured he'd spend the night in there.

Come morning, once it was a decent hour for those who needed sleep and lived a typically diurnal lifestyle, Alioth apparated to Harry's neighborhood. Recalling his own feelings about staying with the Dursleys, Alioth didn't want to leave Harry there any longer that he had to.

He knocked politely on the door just before eight and didn't have long to wait until the door was pulled open to reveal Harry who grinned so wide it must have been painful. Clearly the boy hadn't been certain that he'd actually show up if he was this excited to see him.

"Are you ready?" Alioth asked with amusement.

"Yeah!" Harry exclaimed. "Let me just tell them I'm leaving and get my things. I'll just... be right back. Wait here." He emphasized this last and watched Alioth intently for his nod before reluctantly retreating back inside. He seemed to fear Alioth would vanish if he took his eyes off him.

He'd been waiting only a dozen or so seconds when he heard raised voices inside. Before he could decide if he wanted to eavesdrop on what he suspected was an unpleasant conversation, the question became moot as footsteps rapidly approached the door. It was snapped open a moment later to reveal the man Alioth suspected was Petunia's cousin and Harry called Mr. Evans. Alioth had never actually asked Harry about the people he lived with. Talking about it made Harry uncomfortable and Alioth had never cared enough to push him.

"What is your name, boy?" the man snapped out.

Alioth blinked and took a moment to keep his magic from lashing out at being called "boy". This piece of filth said it in exactly the same tone Vernon had always used and the amount of rage that swept through him at hearing it was honestly shocking. When he was sure that he wouldn't curse the fool on the spot, the said with relative civility. "Alioth Black. Sir."

The man sneered at the unusual first name. "Well... Mr. Black, I would like you off my property
and I would like you to stay away from my ward. The boy is enough of a Freak without an influence such as you. He will not be staying with you this summer or any other time. Now leave before I phone the authorities.” With that, he stepped back and slammed the door in Alioth's face.

Alioth stared at it for a long moment, giving honest thought to taking the boy by force. Happily, the impulse passed fairly quickly and his rational mind reasserted itself to point out that that complete one-eighty was very likely not natural. He should have suspected this. Why would Albus let him get hold of Harry again after his attempts to separate them over the school year. The man had probably made plans for the next school year as well.

With a sigh, Alioth made his way to a shadowed alley and disillusioned himself before returning to Harry's house. As he'd suspected, it was only a few minutes before Mr. Evans appeared again, now wearing his suit jacket and carrying a briefcase. He approached a black sedan as it pulled up to the curb and Alioth hit him with a quick tracking charm. He'd assumed the man would be heading to work soon and he was pleased to find he seemed to be correct about that.

Once the charm was attached, Alioth headed to a bookstore he knew in London. There it was easy to find a map of London. He purchased the map and once he felt the tracker stop moving, he attached his end of the tracking spell to the map. It took a few seconds as the spell settled into the map, and then a small red dot appeared at the location. With a smirk, Alioth folded the map back up and found a taxi to take him to Cabot Square. Mr. Evans, it appeared, worked in the new office building there. An inquiry with the sign in the lobby informed him that it was used by some Swiss bank. So Mr. Evans was some kind of banker. That made some sense for the mildly upper-class neighborhood in which they lived.

Stepping into the loo, he renewed the disillusionment charm and followed the tracker up to Mr. Evans office. Apparently, the man was an investment banker with his own small office on the fifth floor. He was alone in the office, so Alioth let himself inside. He didn't remove the disillusionment because it was altogether better if there was less possible evidence to connect him to this - like a memory floating around in this man's mind of seeing him appear in his office.

Mr. Evans looked up when the door opened and his eyes narrowed uncertainly when the door closed without anyone apparent. Alioth delved into the man's mind before he could look away.

Ten minutes later, Alioth left the office and activated his portkey back to Castle Black. He went directly to his sitting room and sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands. He was having an attack of conscience. This hadn't happened to him in quite some time and he wasn't really sure how to handle it.

Mr. Evans - John Patrik Evans, he knew now - had met Petunia and Lily only a handful of times when they were young. His father and Harry's maternal grandfather were brothers, but never particularly close. He was younger than Petunia by a few years. Alioth hadn't paid attention to all the details, but he had found that he'd married Annette Evans nee Grand in the early eighties. In 1991, they'd been trying for their first child.

That's when evidence of mental tampering began. Albus had covered his tracks pretty well, but the Evans' had suddenly stopped trying to get pregnant that summer despite having been optimistically preparing a nursery just a week prior. Days after this drastic change, Harry had come to live with them. Albus had shown up on their doorstep with the boy and explained that he desperately needed family with whom to live. He explained that the boy had been living on the street since the death of his dear aunt and uncle, Petunia and Vernon and their son Dudley. A tragic accident involving a gas line. Harry had just happened to be out of the house, staying with a friend that night, but he'd run away instead of going to the authorities, frightened of what would happen to him.
The Evans had seemed to genuinely feel for the boy and after a private conversation in the next room, they'd agreed to take him. That memory had actually seemed genuine. The problems started almost immediately, however. Resentment, fear, hatred, impatience, and intolerance. Alioth had watched it all unfold with a dull sort of horror. Compulsions, he was sure of it. If one only looked at that night forward, they might believe it, but if they looked deeper into Mr. and Mrs. Evans, they would see decent, tolerant people. They would see a complete personality change.

And Alioth suddenly felt horribly guilty for murdering the Dursleys. The prejudices and treatment of the Dursleys and the Evans was entirely too similar to be coincidence. Merlin, the Dursleys might have been genuinely decent people before Dumbledore got to them. He'd had no reason to even think to check...

It didn't take him too long to push away the guilt. He'd been down this road before. This wasn't the first time that he'd hurt people because of Dumbledore's schemes and he suspected it may not be the last. The blame did not lie with him. It lay solely upon Dumbledore.

Alioth spent the rest of the day in the library, trying to clear his head. He'd done a lot of bad things. He knew that. He wasn't a saint. He did what he felt was necessary without a great deal of morals getting in the way. But there were lines he really did try not to cross. Killing innocents was one of them, and damn it if it didn't look like the Dursleys had been innocents. Victims, even. Dismissing the guilt intellectually was easier than overcoming it emotionally, but he knew he'd get there. It would just take a little time.

He wished that he could help the Evans. It might go a long way toward sating his guilt, but he knew that he couldn't. Not right now, at least. Perhaps after Harry turned seventeen he would be able to correct the damage Albus had done. They'd still be young enough to start a family if they wished. Right now, they were too valuable to Albus. He wasn't going to just let them go. Even if they were to flee the country and disappear, Albus would just find some other chumps to use, and Harry's situation could become even worse.

When six o'clock rolled around, Alioth returned to Harry's neighborhood and knocked on the door again.

This time, John opened the door with a pleasant smile for Alioth. "Please, come in. You're just on time," he greeted amiably, if still a bit stiffly.

"Thank you," Alioth smiled in return as he followed the man into his house. Okay, so it wasn't exactly ethical, but he may have removed some of Albus' compulsions and planted some of his own. He'd been careful to make sure they were untraceable. Albus could no more try to incriminate Alioth for this than Alioth could incriminate him. Occlumency had been a bitch for Alioth to learn, but once he had, Legilimency had come easily and he was very good at it. He hadn't done anything malicious anyway. He'd just implanted a compulsion to like him and trust him and removed some of those that had so efficiently smothered the man's true personality. He wasn't actually that bad, strangely. A little too stiff and formal but not an arsehole.

Harry looked between bewildered and just plain fearful of Alioth's sudden appearance and strange acceptance in the house. Alioth just sent him a wink and a whispered promise to explain later when he had a moment alone with the boy.

Alioth joined them for dinner. It turned out Annette was an excellent cook, so he was glad he'd chosen to invite himself for dinner rather than just showing up to get Harry. He used the time they were eating to subtly enter Annette's mind and make changes similar to those he'd made with John.
When desert was served, he broached the subject. "So, I was wondering if you'd reconsider letting Harry come stay with me over the summer."

"Well, I don't see why not," John said after a moment of thought. "He seemed to enjoy staying with you last summer."

Harry started choking.

They all looked at him in concern, though Alioth wore a small smirk as well. "Are you all right, Harry?" He asked innocently.

Harry nodded as he took a sip of his milk and cleared his throat roughly, "That would really be okay, sir?" He asked John hopefully.

"Sure," John said with a smile. "He seems like a well-behaved young man."

Annette smiled slightly at Harry, "It's fine with me, Harry. Have fun, dear."

Fifteen minutes later, Alioth portkeyed back to Castle Black with a very confused boy.

"What did you do to them?" Harry demanded immediately, though he was clearly more impressed than bothered by it.

Alioth sent the boy an amused smirk, pausing to call a house elf to take Harry's trunk to his room. "Just a little mind magic," he admitted, "but that's something that we really should talk about." He didn't think the boy would be up to murdering his guardians anytime soon, but it was better safe than sorry. They didn't need a repeat of the Dursleys.

So, he brought Harry to his sitting room, settled him in, and explained what he'd learned of the tampering in John Evans' mind. "I've no way to prove that Dumbledore was involved," Alioth admitted, "but I consider the timing and content of the compulsions to be extremely suspicious."

Harry looked completely floored by what he'd learned. "But why would Dumbledore want to make my relatives hate me?" He almost whispered.

Alioth sighed, "I can only speculate, Harry."

"Please," the boy begged.

Alioth nodded. "The happier that you are, the more you have to live for. The more reluctant you'll be to risk your life. Also, if your life away from Hogwarts is a nightmare, then the magical world and Dumbledore are your saviors for taking you away from it. I suspect he's manipulating you. Grooming you to be the selfless hero he wants. Someone with very little sense of self-preservation that is willing to give everything for the wizarding world that seems so wonderful compared to anything else he's ever known."

Harry swallowed and stared blankly at the wall for a long minute before finally shaking his head and coming out of his daze. "I need to sleep, I think."

It was early yet, but Alioth didn't question it. This was a lot to take in for a thirteen-ish-year-old boy. He really had no idea when Harry's birthday actually was, but he suspected the boy was around the same age as his yearmates – likely older than Harry Potter's birthday suggested, as he'd always been among the youngest in his year.

With Harry likely intent on spending the rest of his night in his suite, Alioth returned to the library.
He'd had a thought while reading the previous night about a way to use the Mark to control, or rather stop, really, Severus' aging. Alioth had no intention of letting the man grow old and die. Or even just grow old. He didn't imagine Severus would be interested in living forever if he had to do it looking and feeling like an old man.

Plus, well, Alioth would love him no matter how he looked, but that didn't mean he didn't appreciate him in his thirties.

The next day, neither of them talked about Dumbledore or the Evans at all. Harry was quieter than normal, but otherwise seemed to be dealing with it well. They spent some time in the library in the afternoon, easily falling back into the rhythm of Alioth giving Harry books to read to continue to round out his knowledge of the wizarding world and prepare him to take the Potter Lordship one day.

They had a light dinner early and at five o'clock were ready to leave.

"So, where are we going?" Harry asked curiously. Alioth had told him that they were going to spend some time at another Black property that needed a little work, but he hadn't told him where.

"I'll tell you when we get there," Alioth said mischievously as he palmed the permanent portkey, which was in the form of a big, ancient skeleton key, complete with a skull at the base. Along the side of the key, it was engraved with the words, Black Palm Hall.

Harry eyed him suspiciously for a moment before extending his hand to the portkey.

A yank behind the naval and a dizzying ride later, they landed on soft ground and Harry collapsed, unable to get his feet under him at the right moment. It really was a learned skill that could only be picked up through practice, though a respectable agility certainly helped things along.

The temperature was a good bit warmer here than it had been in England, the humidity higher as well, though not unpleasantly so. And the sun had just crested the horizon, sending a shower of light onto the manor house where it sat neatly surrounded by palms and other tropical vegetation. A glance back showed the ground sloping down slightly, turning to pale sand, and then the sparkling ocean.

Alioth tipped his head back and took a deep breath of the warm, salty air.

"Bloody hell," Harry's muttered expletive drew Alioth's amused gaze. "Where are we?" Harry asked again.

Alioth grinned this time, "This is a private, unplottable island sort of between Hawaii and Maui."

"Hawaii?" Harry exclaimed, his expression caught between thrilled and incredulous. "We're on an island by Hawaii? Merlin, I've never even been to the ocean!"

Alioth smiled fondly at his young companion. "Come. Let us investigate the house and then we’ll see about the beach. The sun has barely risen here, so we’ve all day ahead of us."

The next several hours were spent investigating the property. The “house” was actually a ridiculously massive French Renaissance style manor house with thirty-six bedrooms and extensive gardens, all of which required three house-elves to keep in good repair, even without anyone in residence. He made a point to inform the elves that they’d done a very good job as the house and gardens were spotless.
He set up himself in the Lord’s Suite while Harry settled in the Heir Suite. Harry was about bouncing out of his skin in his eagerness to explore the beach, so Alioth gave him an engraved electrum arm band that he’d picked up the last time he was in Indonesia. The charm was a pretty common one in coastal areas. It would return the wearer to the surface should he become frantic and to the beach with a word or if the wearer became unconscious. It was also capable of supplying a bubblehead and ocular protection charm at a voice command, allowing the wearer to explore under the water without scuba gear. Finally, it had a tracking charm attached to a coin Alioth carried, which would also alert him to any kind of distress from Harry. After explaining the function of the armband and gaining a promise not to take it off - with dire threats of sticking charms should he break the promise – Alioth let Harry go explore the beach on his own while he headed for the library.

One interesting bit Alioth had discovered since he’d started visiting the Black properties, was that every single house had some rare books they had withheld from the main library, so each library provided an exciting challenge to locate the real gems hidden among the more common books.

The first thing Alioth did, while Harry was busy, was to choose a section of bookcase and create a small hallow behind one of the shelves, directly within the thick stone walls. Here, he secreted Ravenclaw’s diadem. He then sealed it seamlessly and returned all the books in front of it. With no actual magical concealment or traps, detecting it was almost impossible.

Truly, the magical world did not appreciate muggle techniques as it should and most magical beings could be fooled rather easily by employing them.

The horcruxes would be sufficiently magically protected behind the always paranoid Black Wards, some of which were unique to the family whereas others were just the very best in existence. Normal people might put such wards on the ancestral manor, but there weren’t many who did it with every single property they owned. It was a fact that would provide added protection to the horcruxes he was hiding because they were hidden behind powerful wards, but the wards were so common to the Blacks that no one could guess which house hid something extra.

With the diadem safely concealed, Alioth turned his attention to exploring the contents of the library. This property was one of the few that he didn’t think needed any work in repairs or remodeling. Apart from being shamelessly massive for a beach retreat, it actually fit surprisingly well among the sand and palms. The stone was a pale, sandy brown, the architecture pleasing to the eye and not the more typical Medieval Gothic theme the family seemed to prefer. Since he didn’t need to work on the house or land, Alioth was going to just enjoy a couple weeks proper vacation before moving on to another property.

Maybe he’d change into something more appropriate for the beach and take a book out there to read.

“Problems sleeping?” Alioth inquired when Harry dragged himself to the breakfast table after their second night on the island.

Harry grunted, blinking his eyes several times like he was trying to clear his vision. He all but fell on the strong breakfast tea provided at perfect drinking temperature on the table. He downed his first cup before he seemed capable of speech. “I’ve been having… strange dreams,” he admitted. “They’re like, they’re like memories, except they’re in places I’ve never been, with people I’ve never met. But I feel like I’m me, even though it’s some other kid.”

Alioth nodded. He’d honestly expected this sooner, but the kid had struggled with Occlumency a great deal. He supposed it was time to tell him the truth, then. “Finish your breakfast,” he
advised. “Then we’ll talk about it.” He knew the boy wouldn’t be eating any more once he heard what Alioth had to say.

Harry looked uncertain, but he did as instructed. They dined in silence until both were full. Alioth called for the table to be cleared, then leaned back in his seat and considered the boy next to him. He knew this was going to be difficult for him to hear, though he wasn’t sure what to expect beyond that. Tears? Rage? Denial?

Who could say?

“Those dreams are a result of your Occlumency training,” Alioth began. “They feel like memories because they are. They’ve been blocked for years, but your growing mental acuity is allowing them back into your mind. The dreams are happening as they move from your subconscious mind into your conscious mind. We can do some Occlumentic exercises to encourage the process, but that’s the most we can do.”

“Wait,” Harry interrupted, confused and irritated. “No. They’re not… They can’t be actual memories. In the dreams, I’m some kid called Alex and I’m American. They’re not my memories, they’re like… someone else’s that just got in my head somehow.”

Alioth shook his head sadly, “They are yours. Until the summer of 1991, you weren’t Harry Potter. You were that other boy. Harry Potter disappeared in 1988 and was never seen or heard from again. Dumbledore needed Harry Potter. Even if not the real one. He needed everyone to believe the Boy-Who-Lived had been recovered. He made you into Harry Potter.”

“No!” the boy – Alex, apparently – insisted, scrambling from his chair so quickly that he stumbled and nearly fell. He ran his hands roughly through his hair and paced to the window, then turned quickly back, “Do you have any idea how mental you sound? I’m not me? Dumbledore, he-! He did what? He kidnapped me? That’s what you’re saying! He kidnapped me and he-! He just made me someone else?! That doesn’t… happen! It doesn’t! Why are you saying this?! I mean, I know you don’t like Dumbledore. I know you’ve always accused him of using me and… and- and the prophecy! The…”

He dug his fingers into his hair and clutched at his head. “It can’t be true. It doesn’t… He wouldn’t! No one would do this!” the last was all but screamed at Alioth as the boy tore his hands from his hair and turned wild eyes on him.

Alioth watched it all with deep sadness. He didn’t regret changing his identity, because he knew that none of this was his fault. One did not blame the sane for the actions of the mad. His quiet sadness seemed to have more impact on the boy than any words could have.

A sob tore up Harry’s throat and he collapsed, curling himself into a ball on the floor, muffling his cries in his knees.

“Tilly,” Alioth called quietly.

The elf appeared with a soft pop and cast distressed eyes on Harry before settling intently on Alioth, “How can Tilly help, Young Master?”

“Please fetch a calming draught from my room,” he requested quietly, watching the boy with sympathy. He knew what it felt like to be betrayed in the worst possible way, but at least Alioth had had the benefit of being an adult before making the discovery. Not that it made him feel better to learn that he’d been manipulated for decades, but at least he’d had an adult’s perspective with which to handle it.
When the elf returned, Alioth accepted the potion and dismissed her before moving to kneel at Harry’s side. With soft words and gentle hands, he coaxed Harry to swallow the potion. Immediately after doing so, Harry turned into Alioth and wrapped his arms around him, burrowing into his chest.

Alioth fought a sigh and hesitated only a moment before gingerly returning the embrace. He wasn’t very fond of touching anyone that wasn’t Severus – not that he got to touch Severus anywhere outside his dreams. He figured he could make an exception this once, though. Harry had just found out that he’s an entirely different person than he’d thought and that someone had actually kidnapped him and stolen his whole life. He’d probably earned a hug.

Thankfully, it only lasted about half a minute before the calming draught did its job and Harry seemed to realize what was going on. He quickly withdrew, turning his face away to wipe at it swiftly with his sleeve. When he was done, he turned to stare at the floor rather than Alioth. “He really did it, didn’t he?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Alioth responded just as quietly.

“Why?”

The question came so heartbroken and lost that Alioth reaffirmed his plans to kill Albus. Slowly, if feasible.

“Dumbledore thinks that he’s smarter than anyone,” Alioth tried to explain something that even he didn’t fully understand despite his much greater knowledge of the old fool. “He thinks that he knows better. He thinks that only he can save the world. In his fervor to do so, he’s prepared to sacrifice anyone and everyone in that world. The Evans are two such sacrifices. You are another.”

“But why does the world need saving?” Harry came perilously close to whining.

Alioth shook his head and could only reply, “It doesn’t. Dumbledore is more than a little dramatic. If the world is not made in the image of his beliefs, then it is in grave peril. The reality is that if Voldemort won their little war, the life of the average citizen would not change all that much.” He may have been embellishing slightly in this, but he firmly believed that Riddle was sane now, making what he said true enough. As leader of Britain, he couldn’t actually murder all muggleborns or the ICW would definitely become involved. He could make them second-class citizens or even banish them, probably, but Alioth doubted that he would. The man valued magical blood. It was his most prolific followers that were so irrational about muggleborns.

“Then why is there a war at all?” Harry demanded impatiently.

“Because Voldemort wants power and wants to build the world in the image of his beliefs and so does Dumbledore. The Ministry wants the same, but they’re really just pawns between Dumbledore and Voldemort though they don’t realize it. Both of the powerful wizards have so much influence within the Ministry that it’s really just an extension of them rather than an independent entity. The few truly honest people in the Ministry are hobbled by the majority.”

“So, it’s Dumbledore and Voldemort fighting this war and people like my parents-” he cut himself off suddenly, his face a mask of distress.

“Yes,” Alioth answered softly anyway. “People like the Potters are getting killed in the process. Trust me when I say that just as many, if not more, Dark families have been ripped apart by it. My own family is nearing extinction with how many have been lost to death or Azkaban due to this
war. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort are powerful, intelligent, and manipulative. Both are good at drawing others to their cause. And it will not end while they both live.”

Harry was silent for a long minute before bitterly declaring, “I wish they’d both die and leave us alone.” Then he lurched to his feet and fled the room.

Alioth sighed after him and climbed to his feet as well. He felt bad that Harry was suffering so many emotional upheavals this summer, but he knew it was better to tell him than hide it until doing so became impossible as Dumbledore preferred. Harry would be distressed for a few days or weeks or months, but Alioth would support him as he could and the boy would emerge stronger for it, and prepared to deal with the realities of his life rather than stumbling forward in ignorance.

After two and a half quiet weeks on the Hawaiian island, Alioth and Harry were both ready to move on. Alioth wasn't actually sure if Harry would ever want to go back to that island given the memories it was sure to incite. The boy had been quiet and withdrawn since Alioth had told him the truth and he'd stayed a little longer on the island than originally planned, to give Harry more time to come to terms with everything.

As the first week of July came to an end, Alioth prepared them to leave.

"Are you ready to go, Harry?" he smiled at the boy as he made his way into the entry hall.

Harry and he hadn't talked too much these past two weeks. Now the boy took a deep breath and tentatively asked, "Would you…? Would you mind calling me Alex? It's just that Harry isn’t really mine even though it feels like it is, but I don't... feel like it is... I'm not making any sense," the boy ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Surprisingly, I understood that," Alioth said with a small, commiserating smile, which caused the boy to let go of a lot of the tension he'd been holding. "And if you prefer Alex, I see no reason to call you anything else as long as we're not in England."

Alex seemed appeased, though he frowned a little at the mention of England, to which they would eventually have to return. "So!" the boy quickly rallied. "Are you going to tell me where we're going this time?"

Alioth smirked amusedly, "Now, now, we don't want to ruin the surprise."

Alex rolled his eyes good-naturedly, but he didn't verbalize a complaint, which Alioth took as a victory.

Alioth produced another key-shaped portkey and Alex eyed it a moment before gripping it.

"Oh blimey!" Alex complained instantly on landing, yanking the collar of his shirt away from his body. "Is it going to get hotter every time we go somewhere?!"

Alioth shook his head at his young companion and anointed them both with cooling charms as the temperate had risen at least several degrees from the island they'd just left. That done, he turned his attention to the residence in front of them. Surprisingly, it was rather modestly sized for the Blacks. A fairly reasonable five or six thousand square meters instead of the more common fifteen or sixteen thousand. It looked to be only three floors, though the first floor was almost double the height of the other two. It was also done in the local style of architecture, which made Alioth think it was likely purchased by the Blacks rather than built by them.

“Welcome to India,” Alioth smiled at his young companion before leading the way into the house.
He took a few minutes to meet with the two resident house elves, then released Harry – Alex – to explore and choose a room while Alioth sent the elves to unpack his things in the master suite. First on the to-do list for this property, Alioth made his way to the ward room at the center of the second sublevel. He could feel immediately that the wards were weak. This property had been vacant close to fifty years, and though the house elves had been diligent in maintaining it, their magic couldn’t charge the wards. Indeed, their magic drew from the wards to maintain their bond in absence of any actual Black family members being anywhere near them on a regular basis. The Hawaiian manor had sat very near a ley line, plus the private tropical island had seen more recent use. For this house, he would need to perform a small ritual to charge the wards, but first he wanted to be sure he fully understood them.

Thankfully, this wasn’t Hogwarts, the ward room was only a twelve-foot cube, so it wouldn’t take overly long. They’d left Hawaii at six in the afternoon, meaning they’d arrived in India at nine o’clock the following morning. They’d just had dinner before leaving, so breakfast wouldn’t be necessary. Alioth spent the rest of the morning looking over the wards, finally heading up for lunch. He made a quick stop by his rooms to grab a potion, which he brought with him. He’d instructed the elves to set their meal on the veranda as it was a beautiful day.

He took a seat, casting a mild cooling charm to make the temperature more bearable, then spent a minute enjoying the view. There was a Bengal tiger sprawled across the lawn, he noted with some wonder. Alioth may be much older than he looked, but there were some areas in which he truly had very little experience. Travel, for one. Before coming back in time, Alioth had hardly gone anywhere. Oh, he’d traveled to foreign markets to search for books, but he’d been so focused on his task, he’d never stopped to appreciate the country around the markets.

This felt really good, actually. It would be perfect if Severus were with him, but there was plenty of time yet for that.

The approach of clumsy footsteps drew his attention from the view to his young companion, who was dragging his feet and rubbing at tired eyes. It wasn’t surprising. Their bodies were used to Hawaii time, yet, which would make this the early hours of the morning rather than the middle of the day.

Alioth smiled at the boy and offered the potion he’d collected. “Wakefulness,” he explained when Alex just stared at it blankly.

The boy took it with a sigh of relief, swallowing down the minty contents in one. Once it was down, his eyes finally opened all the way and he grinned at Alioth. “Wow. I love that stuff. Wish I could take it all the time. It sure beats sleep.”

Alioth chuckled softly, “It can’t replace your body’s need to sleep. Just delay it. That dose should hold you until ten or eleven tonight. Now come have a look at this,” he gestured toward the view off the balcony.

Blinking curiously, Alex joined him, squinting out at the scenery for a moment before his eyes widened as he spotted the tiger. “Woah,” he breathed. “Is that a wild tiger?”

“Ailoth chuckled softly, “It can’t replace your body’s need to sleep. Just delay it. That dose should hold you until ten or eleven tonight. Now come have a look at this,” he gestured toward the view off the balcony.

Blinking curiously, Alex joined him, squinting out at the scenery for a moment before his eyes widened as he spotted the tiger. “Woah,” he breathed. “Is that a wild tiger?”

“It is indeed,” Alioth promised.

Alex chuckled nervously. “That’s wicked, but I am not going out there alone now.”

Alioth huffed in amusement, “Don’t worry. The wards won’t allow it to harm you.”

“How’s that?” Alex frowned uncertainly.
“I’ve been looking at the wards all morning. There’s one in there specifically to draw in wildlife. They’ll feel safe here and so come to rest and bring their young. There’s also a non-aggression ward set specifically to target animals. That tiger wouldn’t even attack a baby deer if it decided to curl up and sleep with it. Not while it’s within the wards. Obviously, it has to go outside to eat.”

“Huh,” Alex muttered, “Maybe you could… show me where the wards end? So, I don’t accidentally go past them and get eaten by a tiger?”

Alioth grinned at the cheeky brat and moved to the lunch table, which promptly filled with food. “Sure. We’ll fly the perimeter after lunch. I want to check and make sure it’s all still firmly anchored anyway.” They ate in silence for a few minutes before Alioth inquired, “How would you feel about helping me charge the wards?”

Alex blinked and swallowed hastily. “How do we do that?”

So Alioth explained to him a bit about how a recharging ritual worked. Essentially, they’d go down to the ward room and Alioth would carefully arrange some rune-carved candles around the room. Then they’d paint runes onto their hands and do a small chant. After that, it was just a lot of sitting still while the wards drew on their magic. When the draw made Alex tired, he could wash away the runes on his hands and leave. Alioth would stay longer since he had more magic to give.

Alex looked very curious about the ritual and promised to take part.

“I plan to take the rest of the day and tomorrow to study the wards,” Alioth confided, “so we’ll do the ritual the day after that.”

When they’d finished eating, they took their flight around the perimeter of the wards, which actually extended a good kilometer on each side of the house. It wasn’t a particularly large property by Black standards, but it was still a very nice vacation spot, especially with the wards drawing in the wildlife for them to observe and enjoy safely.

Alex was all but jumping in his excitement by the time they’d completed the flight and Alioth made a mental note to pick up a camera for the boy as soon as they got to a market. He should have something tangible to show his friends about his summer. It was something Alioth had wished he could have done as a child when Hermione returned with stories of France and Italy and even Ron talked about their trip to Egypt. Alioth hadn’t ever had anything to talk about as being locked in his room and slaving after the Dursleys was hardly comparable.

Recharging the wards went without complications. Alex found the whole experience thrilling enough that Alioth was sure he’d have no problem in Ancient Runes in the fall. He had a million questions about everything, and he insisted that it tickled a little when the wards drew on his magic, which was why he kept randomly laughing. Alioth suspected that it was just the boy’s reaction to feeling his magic connected to something outside of him for the first time. It was a strange experience and likening it to “tickling” was certainly far from the worst response he could have had. Perhaps the boy would discover an interest in warding, though Alioth knew it was far too soon to truly speculate. The boy seemed to be fascinated in every kind of magic he encountered.

Six days after arriving in India, Alioth finally stirred himself from his study of the wards and then the library to take Alex to see a bit more of the country. The house itself was actually concealed within the Kanha Tiger Reserve near the center of the country, and since Alioth didn’t actually know anything in the country to be able to apparate, they took brooms to the nearest city Alioth knew of with a portkey office. Jabalpur was an hour away by broom, but the rushing air felt good in the heat and the fickle July weather was kind enough not to rain on them. A muggle illusion
charm made them look like nothing more than a pair of local birds to any muggle who happened to
look at them, whereas they looked normal to anyone magical, which was considerably more
pleasant than a regular disillusionment as they could see each other.

The portkey office was easy enough to find, being attached to the muggle airport. The portkeys
were relatively cheap, and they didn’t actually require any form of identification to purchase them
as long as they didn’t transport anyone outside the country. Alioth shrunk down their brooms and
returned them to his pocket before they each took hold of the portkey and landed in the much larger
New Delhi airport.

They were only in the city half an hour when a tickle in his throat reminded Alioth that they were
in one of the most polluted cities in the world. The next several hours were spent exploring the
city’s many markets, both magical and muggle. Some were even a combination of the two, with
variations of muggle repelling wards on the magical businesses. He spent a few minutes feeling
his way through the magic of one such ward until he figured out how it worked and explained to a
very curious Alex.

“The ward serves as an illusion to muggles, meaning that it tricks their mind into believing
something that isn’t true. Any muggle looking at it will see something very boring or uninteresting
to them. Should they intend to approach regardless of that, it gets stronger, causing them to
experience something actually unpleasant, such as a bad smell or an offensive image. If that
doesn’t turn them away, they’ll experience something mildly frightening, enough to trigger the
flight response in their brain. It won’t send them running screaming, but probably walking away
very quickly with frequent looks over their shoulder. Of course, most people won’t ever look past
the initial estimation of uninteresting.”

“That’s brilliant,” Alex said with wonder. “It’s so interesting that magic can do all that.”

Alioth favored the boy with a fond smile and they continued on with him advising Alex to pick out
some souvenirs for himself in addition to some gifts for his friends, though he advised him not to
too much for his friends because they’d have plenty more shopping to do before the summer
was over and he didn’t want to be handing over massive sacks full of gifts for each of them.

Alioth picked up a few interesting bits and pieces for himself along the way, but half of his
attention was devoted to the smog problem and a spell he was working out in his head. It
wasn’t an overly difficult spell, but it was always challenging to do it without sitting down and
taking physical notes.

After a leisurely lunch in a nice restaurant, Alioth pulled Alex aside and cast his new spell on each
of them.

“What was that?” Alex asked curiously, apparently trying to define an effect.

“It’ll protect you from the smog in the air,” he explained. “A bubble head charm or enchanted
muggle medical mask would work as well, but they’re both very obvious and rather in the way,
especially if you want to eat or drink. This spell will simply filter the air as it passed through your
mouth and nose so that the pollutants are removed before it hits your throat.”

Alex smiled, typically delighted by the new magical discovery, “Where’d you learn that?”

Alioth returned the smile with a small one of his own, “I created it, actually. This morning. It uses
elements of some other spells that I know, so it wasn’t overly difficult to put together.”

Alex stared at him, visibly impressed, “You can really do that? Like, just make a new spell?”
“Yes,” Alioth replied, amused. “Where did you imagine the spells you learn at school came from if not someone creating them?”

“Well,” Alex floundered, “I just… I guess I just thought it was like really old people with giant Hermione brains or something, like spending hours bent over a desk figuring things out. I didn’t think someone who hasn’t even graduated Hogwarts could do it.”

Alioth laughed at the mental image Alex conjured. “Nonsense. Do you really think some stuffy old man created taratallegra? Or rictusempra? Or, Merlin forbid, the bat bogey hex?”

Alex snickered.

Alioth shook his head, “No, creating spells really isn’t that difficult in general. Certain spells can be extremely complicated, but most actually are not. You’ll touch a bit on the subject in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes over the next five years, but since both are generally required to do anything impressive with spell creation, neither class goes into it in much detail. There are some books on it, but you’d need at least a basic grounding in Arithmancy and Ancient Runes to get much out of them.”

“Oh,” Alex deflated slightly.

“But, I suppose I can teach you some of the basics,” Alioth conceded, aware that he was a pushover for this kid. It was hard to not want to encourage this kind of genuine fascination with magic. “You won’t be able to make spells to attach to a person and filter all the air they breathe over an extended period of time. Not for a while yet, but you could probably manage to create a spell to purify the air in a single area at the moment of casting. Or other simple things.”

“Really?!” Alex actually bounced on his toes a little, causing Alioth to chuckle. Merlin, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed as freely as he did with this boy.

“Really,” he promised. “Now, let’s see if we can find some introductory books on Arithmancy and Ancient Runes and perhaps spellcrafting before we head home.”

“Oh, are we leaving already?” the boy frowned.

“No,” Alioth assured. “I think we’ll stick around through dinner and head home right after.”

And so, he led a once more excited boy to the nearest available rickshaw to head to the next magical marketplace on their map.

Alioth and Alex spent two weeks in India. In addition to their trip to New Delhi, they also spent a day in Mumbai and another in Kolkata, each of which Alioth stored carefully in his mind so he wouldn’t have to worry about portkeys next time. Apparation without a license wasn’t legal in India, but it wasn’t policed much, either. And he looked old enough now that no one was going to look at him twice if they saw him apparate. As of September, he’d officially be of age, so he was pretty close, even if he wouldn’t be able to get his license right away as he’d be in Hogwarts.

When they weren’t seeing the country, Alioth walked Alex through some of the basics of spellcrafting and the boy took time to read the books they’d bought to help. Complex spells were those that directly affected a living creature, those that had a duration rather than happening instantly, and those that had to factor in multiple parts or variables. Something like lighting a candle, creating a momentary breeze, or warming or cooling the air in a small area were all quite simple and the ones he’d set Alex to creating first, though the boy didn’t manage to complete any while they were in India with so much else going on.
When Alioth was ready to move on, instead of choosing their next destination, he decided to let Alex pick. Though he had more properties to see to, none of it was really of great urgency. He’d already reorganized the elves to ensure that they weren’t left completely alone for extended periods of time as poor Kreacher had been, and he had them fixing up any property that needed it to the best of their abilities. They’d keep a few more years if that’s how long it took for him to get to them personally.

“Can we… go to New York?” Alex asked shyly in response to Alioth’s question. “It’s just… I think maybe that’s where I’m from.”

“Of course,” Alioth agreed readily. The Black family didn’t own any property in New York, but it sounded like an interesting enough place to visit and it was one of many that Alioth had never seen.

So, the next day, Alioth apparated them back to Mumbai and they visited a travel agency in order to book a room. Alioth didn’t fancy hopping all over the city looking for appropriate accommodations that were available at the last minute. They ended up booking the Presidential Suite at The Pierre in Manhattan for two weeks. Yes, it was exorbitantly expensive, but Alioth figured there wasn’t much point in being rich if one didn’t enjoy the perks.

Of course, the problem with traveling to New York rather than directly to a property owned by the Blacks was that they’d have to come into the country officially, which required a quick detour to Indonesia, where Alioth knew of a fellow who made really good I.D.s, ones that checked out in muggle computer systems and everything, but had the added passport page for magicals. He got them set up with passports as Alan and Alex Black, brothers. “Alan” Black – because it would make them harder to track if Dumbledore was looking – was nineteen and his little brother’s legal guardian after the tragic deaths of their parents. Alex was thrilled to be a temporary Black and more than happy to leave “Harry Potter” behind entirely. Dummy wands were expensive and significantly illegal in most countries, but had the benefit of containing a magical signature all their own, meaning that when the wand was registered, it recorded the signature of the wand, not that of the wielder.

With their disguises thus complete, a portkey delivered them to Grand Central Station, Magical Transport Center, where they passed through customs without issue, their I.D.s and dummy wands more than equal to the task, as Alioth had known they would be. First, Alioth stopped at the money changer, which was supplied by Gringotts, as evidenced by the goblin tellers. He didn’t have much for cash left, so Alioth used his Gringotts card – which was accepted everywhere VISA was accepted as they owned the muggle company – to withdraw a few thousand American Dollars. That done, he enlarged their luggage so as not to confuse the muggles, and quickly transfigured it to look like some fancy matching set. Living up to expectations could save a lot of hassle, after all.

They took a taxi to their hotel and received a very warm reception once he mentioned that their reservation was for two weeks in the Presidential Suite.

The Suite, when they got up there, was really more like a flat than a hotel room. It was small compared to what they were used to, but in a kind of cozy way. It wasn’t like the two of them actually needed six parlors, four dining rooms, two solariums, a ballroom, and everything else that comes with monstrously sized manors and castles. The suite offered two bedrooms with private baths, spacious living and dining rooms, and a small kitchen, should they ever feel like cooking in rather than ordering from room service.

And the views were incredible with it being situated right off Central Park and not far from
Midtown.

They gained nine hours on the trip, turning an afternoon departure into a morning arrival, and they spent the entire first day exploring the city, eating from street carts and food trucks, wandering through the park, and buying whatever caught their attention in the shop windows they passed.

By the time they returned to the hotel that evening, both were incredibly exhausted and couldn’t do much more than wash up and crawl into bed.

On their second day in New York, they ordered in breakfast and then made somewhat more constructive plans for the day. Alex was virtually certain that he’d been from New York now that he was actually there.

"I feel like I'm walking around with a terminal case of déjà vu," he complained over breakfast.

"Well, let's go from there, then," Alioth advised, and they called down for a car. The spent the morning instructing the extremely well-tipped driver to take them all over the city, following Alex's impressions of memories. He couldn't quite pinpoint anything, but certain areas felt more familiar than others, like he could almost remember it. After a break for lunch – for themselves and the driver – they got back to it and just before they were ready to call it a day, Alex pointed them to a specific building in Midtown, which turned out to be an orphanage.

They spent several minutes on the sidewalk looking up at the building that more than likely been Alex's home at one point, before deciding to return to the hotel and start fresh in the morning.

With the help of a mildly illegal charm that caused muggles to always give you the benefit of the doubt, even to the point of making mental excuses for you, Alioth and Alex returned to the orphanage the next day for a consultation with Ms. Albrite, Matron of the orphanage. Alioth prompted her by announcing who Alex was and that he'd formerly lived there until 1991. She remembered then, helped along by the charm, and greeted him warmly, remarking on how different he looked. She seemed to become quite genuinely distressed to learn that the boy was suffering from partial amnesia. He'd begun regaining memories, but hadn't very many about his childhood.

"Oh, dear," she sighed sadly, "I really do wish I had a happier tale to tell. Alex, your parents passed away when you were six years old. You didn't have any brothers or sisters or any other family. It was... a fire. In the apartment building you lived in. Something wrong in the electrical system, I think. You climbed out the window. It was a miracle. In the papers for weeks. The fire department had already given up on getting anyone else out, and then you appeared, like magic, from a window that looked totally engulfed in flames.

"Unfortunately, without any family that could take you, you ended up here. You got along with the other children just fine, but you never got close to anyone. You were sent to more than one foster home, but they never worked out for long. Oh, just a moment." She went to a large filing cabinet against the wall and rifled through the files a long moment before coming back with one in her hand. She glanced through it and nodded to herself. "'Conflicts of personality', is what the first home cited after just three weeks. The second home lasted four months before they sent you back for what they called a 'troublemaker attitude', but I made a note here that the problem was likely with the family as you'd never caused any trouble here."

She flipped a few pages and went on, "Ah, here it is. In June of 1991, you were adopted by John and Annette Evans of London England. The entire adoption was handled through their lawyer, so
I'm afraid I never met them. Are you still with them?"

"Yes," Alioth supplied when Alex just continued to stare blankly at his knees as he absorbed the new information. "I'm John's cousin. I'm just helping out. I just have one more question, Ms. Albrite, if you could. What is Alex's full name?"

Ms. Albrite pressed a tissue to her nose briefly before quietly replying, "Alexander Jonas Jones, and his parents were Susan and Bill. I'm sorry I don't know Susan's maiden name."

"You've been very helpful, ma'am," Alioth assured her. "Thank you so much."

They returned to the hotel room after that and Alex retreated to his bedroom for several hours. When he came out for dinner, he still looked like he was working through things in his mind.

"Your miraculous survival of the fire sounds like textbook accidental magic," Alioth volunteered between bites of their delicious American cheeseburgers. "Magic in young witches and wizards is undisciplined and chaotic, but it does tend to come out in moments of heightened emotion or stress. It is rather common for it to emerge in times of imminent danger. The fact that yours acted over what sounds like at least a couple of minutes rather than just a matter of seconds is proof that it's unusually powerful." He paused a moment before quietly adding, "The news stories about it are likely what drew Dumbledore's attention to you when he was looking for a replacement Harry Potter. He would have wanted someone with a decently powerful magical core if possible, and you certainly qualify."

Alex shook his head, "If that’s true, why didn’t anyone adopt me? Why didn’t someone else see the story and take me away from that place?" he demanded, looking moderately upset.

Alioth sighed, "I can’t know for certain, Alex, but I suspect the muggles that tried were frightened away by your accidental magic. As for magicals, unless they were deliberately searching the muggle world for signs of a magical child, it’s unlikely to have been remarked. Not many magicals read muggle news, and of those who do, many probably would have overlooked the story. Of those that recognized it for what it was… Well, there’s not as many people looking to adopt children as we might like. It’s possible a number of them recognized you for magical but weren’t looking to adopt themselves. They may have assumed someone else would do something about it or not even given it a thought."

Alex slouched a little further and picked at what was left of his food.

"Would you rather have not known?" Alioth posed philosophically. "Any of it, I mean. Would you rather have gone on thinking you were Harry Potter?"

Alex gave that a long moment of deep thought before finally shaking his head, "Yes. No. I don’t… No. I don’t think I would. I mean, I’d’ve been happier not knowing, but I’m glad that I do. Knowledge is power, right? I’d not have known how terrible Dumbledore is, then." He was silent for a long moment and then huffed a quietly unamused laugh, "I’d’ve probably been just what he wanted if not for you."

The next several days took them to the public library, where they discovered the old news articles about the fire. They learned his mother’s maiden name was Haverson. An inquiry into public records in the American wizarding community confirmed that Alexander Jonas Jones was listed as muggleborn. Alex went very quiet after learning that until Alioth finally prompted him about it that evening.

"Are you bothered that you’re a muggleborn rather than a halfblood?” he posed curiously.
Alex blushed, perhaps at being so transparent – young teens blushed so easily, who could tell why they were doing it? – and answered hesitantly, “No. I mean, Hermione’s muggleborn and she’s brilliant with magic, so I don’t think there’s anything bad about being muggleborn. I just… I mean. Well… You don’t mind that I’m muggleborn, right?”

Alioth blinked, honestly not having expected that. He should have, he supposed. He was a Black and a Slytherin. Blood status was just such a massive non-issue in his own mind that he tended to overlook it. “Of course, I don’t mind, Alex. I told you before, blood status doesn’t matter to me. It’s true, there are a number of muggleborn I don’t especially like, but that’s because of their attitude toward the wizarding world. They tend to want to change us to be like the world they grew up in. They look down on us for our differences just because they are different. I have no issue with someone disliking Magical Britain because it’s corrupt and stagnant, because it is. Change is a good and essential part of any society and Magical Britain has not seen nearly enough of it in the last few centuries.

“On the other hand, if a muggleborn comes into the magical world and decides that they dislike the way that we dress, the way that we talk, or the religions we follow, that I can’t countenance. Also, muggleborns who expect us to adapt their technology to work around our magic and form ourselves into a copy of them because they’re intrinsically “better”, that I can’t stand. Our world deserves to grow into a better version of itself, not a magical version of the mess the muggles have managed in the last century. Magic makes us too different for the same things to work equally well or to even make any sense. Muggleborns have a tendency to feel themselves superior because our fashion sense is a little behind or our traditions are too conservative. They completely overlook the fact that our medical abilities are centuries if not millennia beyond the muggles.”

Alioth paused and reined himself in when he realized that he was devolving into a full-on rant. “My point is that I dislike muggleborns who don’t respect the magical world as its own entity yet go about happily enjoying its benefits. I feel exactly the same way about halfbloods or purebloods – blood traitors – who follow similar ideology. If, however, one respects the magical world – even if you don’t like everything about it – then I’ve no problem with them regardless of their blood status. You love magic. I see it all the time. It enthralls and excites you. You are eager to learn about all aspects of magic and embrace them. That, in itself, is enough for me to respect you as someone deserving of magic. Hermione, on the other hand, sees magic as a lifeless tool to be used. She disrespects magic and the magical world yet thinks herself better than us. That, I cannot stand.”

He paused again, then inquired, “Did that make sense to you? I’ve never tried to put it into words before, how I feel about it.”

Alex’s brow was furrowed thoughtfully, “No, it was good. I think I get what you’re saying. Hermione does seem to approach magic like it’s any other school subject.”

“But it’s not just information to memorize,” Alioth nodded. “It’s alive. Vital and precious. To be adored, respected, and cherished.”

Alex smiled, eyes lighting up and Alioth suspected that he knew exactly what Alioth was talking about.

He’d known there was a reason he liked this kid.

As their two weeks in New York neared its end, Alioth and Alex decided that they wanted to stay a little longer and so scheduled another two weeks in the suite. In the first week of August, the American muggle news reported that a heinous mass murderer had escaped from prison in
Alioth gave some thought to whether or not he should do anything about Sirius’ innocence. He was more than capable of getting the man a trial, but if Sirius was exonerated, there was no doubt that he was going to want to claim Alex as his ward. And the man truly had been a terrible godfather. Oh, he’d tried in his way, Alioth supposed, but he’d been at least slightly unhinged from his time in Azkaban. That was hardly an excuse though. Really, the man had probably always had more than a touch of the Black Insanity. He’d tried to feed a school-yard enemy to a werewolf, after all. And not just any werewolf but his own dear friend, who’d have been seriously traumatized at the least and put down as a dangerous creature at the worst. Then, when James and Lily had been killed, Sirius had been more concerned with getting revenge than taking care of his newly orphaned godson, which should have been his first priority. Then he’d broken out of Azkaban to chase Pettigrew again and been reckless enough to attack Ron, thereby dragging Alioth along into that whole mess that had been the end of his third year. In fourth year, the man had had the temerity to lie right to his face about Severus, telling Alioth that the man had never had a friend who wasn’t Dark despite having obviously known that he’d been friends with Lily for years. And when Alioth had needed him most after his confrontation with Voldemort at the end of fourth year, Sirius had gone off to do Dumbledore’s bidding instead, not remaining even a single night to comfort him. The man had practically thrown a tantrum a couple months later when Alioth hadn’t managed to get expelled. And it all came to a head when he’d acted the fool during a deadly fight and gotten himself killed, abandoning Alioth again.

No, that man wasn’t suited to look after any child. Admittedly, he probably wouldn’t do appreciably worse than Dumbledore’s little puppets, but the real danger of Sirius was in making his charge care about him when he wasn’t fit to be the adult said child needed.

With a sigh, Alioth shook his head. He didn’t owe anything to Sirius Black. If the man somehow managed to get exonerated, Alioth would do what he could to mitigate the potential he had to hurt Alex if the boy let himself care for an adult who would eagerly dote upon him, but he wasn’t going to extend himself to help the man gain his freedom. Sirius Black had been dealt a bad hand this time, but he’d been a bully and a reckless fool all his life prior to that, so Alioth imagined it may be earned.

He did recognize that he may be somewhat biased against Sirius since falling in love with Severus as he couldn’t support a man who’d so severely bullied his love, but he wasn’t moral enough to rise above his acknowledged bias in this case. Sirius Black was no more Alioth’s responsibility than Buckbeak or Stan Shunpike. Contrary to what he’d felt in his youth, it was not his responsibility to save everyone.

Alex had been pretty quiet this summer, but that wasn’t really surprising. Alioth couldn’t quite imagine how fucked up it had to feel to find out that someone had erased and rewritten your entire life. Entire being. Even permanently transfigured you to fit your new role. From the pictures they’d found of the boy when he was younger he’d been sandy blond with hazel eyes. The face looked fairly similar, but his nose was a little longer and straighter, his cheekbones slightly higher and his chin a little pointier. Not massive changes, but enough to make him look like he could be James Potter’s son and of course Lily’s eyes.

One night, after one of their quiet days spent mostly at the hotel reading and relaxing, Alex had tentatively admitted over dinner, “I want to hurt Dumbledore for what he did to me. Is that… wrong? I don’t just want him to hurt, Alioth, I want him to die,” he almost whispered. “He’s been so evil to me, but is it wrong? Does it make me just as bad as him?”

“No,” Alioth quickly assured. “Want of revenge when one has been wronged is a very normal part
of the human condition. Some will say it shouldn’t be acted on, but I don’t know that that’s a universal truth. Some people deserve it, after all. I can say that I don’t think it’ll really make you feel better because it won’t undo what’s been done. It will save others from suffering similarly, though. And it will make you feel a little better to know that the person who made your life so painful is at least no longer getting to go on living as though they’d done no wrong. But it won’t fix anything for you.

“As to wanting Dumbledore, specifically, dead, it’d be awfully hypocritical of me to judge you for that as his death is actually on my to-do list,” he admitted.

Alex looked at him wonderingly for a moment before cautiously inquiring, “Why do you hate Dumbledore so much?”

Alioth’s brow rose at the blunt question. It was the sort of thing most would assume they understood as Dark wizards generally hated the Light Blinded old bastard for any number of very valid reasons. Alex wasn’t making an assumption here, though. He was observing Alioth’s strident hatred and attributing it to something more.

Alioth smiled a little, inexplicably proud of the boy. He hesitated a moment, then sighed and pushed away his plate, leaning back in his seat and fixing Alex with his full attention. “You’re not the only one the old man has tried to control, Alex. I’m going to tell you something now that only one other person in the world knows. It’s imperative that it doesn’t get back to the wrong ears, so if you wish to hear it, I’ll spell you so that the information cannot be taken from you forcibly. You’d still be able to tell voluntarily, but I’m trusting that you won’t. Not even your closest friends.”

Alex gulped and nodded.

Alioth took a few minutes to cast the complex secrecy spell, which was actually related to the Fidelius. It required a mark on the skin to fix it in place, but it was nowhere near as complex as that spell and the mark was one Alioth could choose. So, Alex gained a tiny new freckle on his neck, which burned as it appeared, causing the boy to hiss and slap a hand against the offending spot. Alioth hid the secret there, using his will alone to delineate what information this would include.

When he was finished, he nodded, “All done. Now, you wanted to know why I hate Dumbledore so much. The truth is that he used me before moving on to you. I, Alex, am the original Harry Potter.”

Alex physically flinched, then leaned far back in his chair, looking at Alioth in disbelief. “But… You’re not even the right age! And you’re a Black! What…?!”

Alioth smiled a little, “Give me a moment to explain, will you?”

Alex nodded warily.

Alioth took a deep breath and searched for the right place to begin. "I'm not actually sixteen," he admitted finally. "I'm thirty-seven. I was thirty-two when I performed an extremely complex ritual to return me to my eight-year-old body."

Alex was staring at him with wide eyes, his expression confused and unnerved, but he didn’t interrupt.

"You see, Dumbledore did to me what he's trying to do to you. He controlled my life, steered me
into becoming what he wanted me to be, and tricked me into killing a lot of people in the process of killing Voldemort like he wanted me to do. One of the casualties was the man I'd been dating for almost two years. The man I was in love with. I couldn't accept it. So, I spent the next twelve years searching out and finding the means with which to come back. When it succeeded, I decided that Harry Potter needed to disappear. I didn't want to be Dumbledore's pawn again. So, I left the Dursleys and went to Arcturus Black. Thanks to my future knowledge, I knew that Arcturus was dying and desperately in need of an heir. I offered to fix both problems for him, and after some negotiation, he agreed. He blood adopted and renamed me and I cured his ailment. Then I used a growth potion and enrolled in Hogwarts for the 1988-89 school year.

The boy was watching him with something that looked a cross between quiet wonder and quiet horror.

"I had no idea that Dumbledore would kidnap someone and turn them into me, Alex," Alioth softly implored. "When I learned of you during your Sorting, I swore then and there that I would look after you. Protect you from Dumbledore's manipulations, and I've done my best to live up to that ever since."

"You've been manipulating me all this time! Helping me out in first year; that was all to what? Gain my trust?" Alex finally burst out with.

Alioth lifted his eyebrows at the outburst. The poor kid was having a rough time this summer, he supposed. "I never lied to you about that, Alex. I told you right from the start that I had my own agenda. Slytherins always do. It doesn't mean that I didn't genuinely grow to care for you. I promise you, Alex, if I didn't like you, I'd be protecting you from a much greater distance. And I'd not have bothered helping you learn the truth or telling you who I really am and where I really come from. Surely, you've noticed the amount of time I spend around other classmates in and out of school. There's not a single one of them I like enough to spend time with in school, much less out of it."

That calmed Alex down considerably as he thought about it. "So, you're really Harry Potter," he said at last, clearly trying to wrap his mind around it.

Alioth could imagine how strange it must feel when he himself still felt like he was Harry Potter. He'd felt something similar on hearing the name announced at Alex's Sorting.

Several minutes passed in contemplative silence for the younger of the duo before Alex finally said quietly but decisively, "I really do want Dumbledore to die."

It was two days later before Alex curiously asked, "So, did you ever get that guy back? The one you loved?"

Alioth smiled a little, "I'm wearing him down." To Alex's curious look, he explained, "He's quite a bit older than me and obviously wasn't interested in me when I was a child. Now that I'm nearly of age once more, I'm getting closer to getting him back."

Alex looked vaguely uncomfortable with the conversation, but he nodded agreeably enough before going back to his book.

Alioth supposed he was a little young yet to be comfortable talking about a sexual relationship, much less a homosexual one with an older man. He decided not to tell him just yet that the man in question was one of his professors.
Severus laid down on his sofa and closed his eyes, waiting for the headache potion to take full effect on the stubborn stress headaches that had been plaguing him all summer.

Alioth Bloody Black would be the death of him.

Severus had spent most of the summer carefully examining the ward room, literally from top to bottom, and he'd been able to find no evidence whatsoever that the boy had done anything other than what he'd claimed. Also, the work he'd done was perfect. Time would tell for certain, but it appeared that the curse on the Defense post was gone.

Fifty years, and the boy had done it with hardly a thought about how incredibly unbelievable a feat it was.

And then there was his magic. And the fact that it was identical to the unusual magic in the new Mark on his arm. He'd been over it in his head at least once a day since he'd felt Alioth's magic and there was absolutely no doubt that it was the same. Alioth Black was Severus' new master.

And possibly the Master of Death. Whatever that meant.

A sixteen-year-old student with an admitted crush on him literally owned him.

With control of that bond... There is a great deal that Alioth could force him to do – most of it even legal. The bond was a voluntary slavery bond. It could not be forced upon someone nor could they be tricked into it. Only willing, knowing acceptance would allow it to stick. Merlin, but he'd been a fool of a boy back then, giving himself mind, body, and soul to Voldemort without hesitation. Bonding human slaves was heavily frowned upon in Britain, but it wasn't illegal yet provided the bond was voluntary.

And now the Dark Lord had apparently given him away. The most likely time for that to have happened would be at the end of Alioth's fourth year, when he'd confronted the Dark Lord in defense of the Philosopher's Stone at Potter's behest.

Except, this shaded that evening's events in a very different light. The Dark Lord had given one of his slavery bonds to Alioth. Why would he do that, but in exchange for something he wanted more than his slave? Something like a Philosopher's Stone.

Alioth must have helped him to acquire it.

And in return, he'd gotten Severus. There was no way that the Dark Lord would think to offer such a thing to such a person, meaning Alioth must have specifically requested him, which fit with the "interest" the boy had professed in him. The boy had traded the Philosopher's Stone to the Dark Lord in exchange for Severus' slave bond. Which meant that Alioth may not follow the Dark Lord, but he didn't oppose him, either.

The part that was most concerning for Severus personally, however, was the question of whether Alioth had bargained for his bond in order to possess him or protect him from the Dark Lord. The result had been both. Honestly, he wasn't greatly bothered to know that he was no longer a Death Eater despite the implications toward his future ability to be of use when the Dark Lord returned. On the other hand, he now belonged to someone else. Someone whose intentions toward him, he did not understand.

The boy had owned him for a whole year already and had made no allusion toward the fact, nor invoked the bond to control him in any manner. Which didn't necessarily mean anything by itself, though he thought he could perhaps consider it a positive sign. That and the fact that the Mark
never hurt and hadn't since before it had changed. Probably since the time Alioth gained possession of him. More than anything, the Mark felt protective.

He was pretty sure that Alioth didn't know he'd figured out who controlled his Mark, and Severus decided that he would keep it that way as long as possible. There was a chance that the only reason Alioth hadn't utilized the Mark or threatened Severus with it was because he wanted it to remain unknown. Confronting him about it would then cause far more trouble than it was worth. He honestly didn't think Alioth had malicious intentions toward him, but that supposition would not coerce him into lowering his guard.

Unfortunately, all he could do at this point was wait and see what his new master meant to do with him. One thing he did know, however, was that he wouldn't be telling Dumbledore about this unless it became absolutely necessary. His trust in the old man had been wavering for years, in part due to Alioth's insinuations, but he'd not have been convinced that they not made a lot of sense. He'd always known Dumbledore was manipulative and conniving, but had the headmaster really been manipulating Potter with mind magic?

It was a little too easy to believe him capable of it.

Tom Riddle dismissed Lucius with an errant wave of his hand. The blonde gave a shallow bow and retreated from the room. Tom had to admit, he did miss the excessive obeisance a little bit. There was a considerable gratification from watching a rich and powerful Lord kneel before him and kiss his robes, but Tom was sane enough now to recognize that it was the kind of debasement that rich and powerful men like Lucius must resent. Trusting that their fear of him would never be overcome by that resentment was a gamble he chose to avoid. Not to say that he wouldn't still expect such a display if Lucius truly displeased him, but that was different than expecting it on every single meeting.

With a small shake of his head, he dismissed Malfoy from his thoughts and rose from the... well, admittedly it was a throne in an audience chamber, but he deserved some indulgences still. And when Britain was his, the throne would be his by right anyway.

He settled behind his desk in his study and sorted through the written reports his followers had been presenting all morning. His plans were going well, which pleased him greatly. Dumbledore had been spreading rumors of his return since the disappearance of the Philosopher's Stone, but only the old man's most sycophantic followers were actually believing him without any evidence and the more time that passed without any raids, the more skeptical they all became. It was thoroughly amusing.

The Ministry was slowly but surely falling under his control as well. A few unsuspicious deaths due to "accidents" or "natural causes" had eliminated some of the most lily-white fools in the Ministry that weren't too far into Dumbledore's pocket as to be closely watched by him. Add in generous bribes and a few threats and the political climate was turning firmly in Tom's favor while most of the country still believed him dead. His followers had been ordered to make no mention of him in mixed company, even when delivering threats or bribes. Voldemort was to remain a ghost. Which brought him to his current appointment.

Aleksandr Ivanov was announced by a house-elf as he was permitted into the room.

"Greetings, Lord Voldemort," the tall blonde bowed deeply, his voice thick with a Russian accent, but understandable enough.
Tom withheld a grimace at the name he'd honestly come to detest since regaining his sanity. He didn't want to tell people to call him "Tom" or "Lord Riddle" as neither one was particularly impressive, so he ignored it for now.

"Mr. Ivanov," Tom dipped his head slightly. "Have a seat."

The man obeyed quickly. He was nervous but hiding it credibly. "May I just say, you have excellent bone structure, my Lord. With just a few alterations, I could change your look adequately without taking away from your natural beauty at all. Lengthen the nose, sharpen the cheekbones, widen the chin, raise the hairline a little and arch the eyebrows. Change the eye color, of course, and hair color. Perhaps the hair texture, a bit. You will be a vision, my Lord, but entirely unrecognizable."

Tom nodded. The man sounded competent, and his reputation was without equal, his transfigurations always completely permanent. "I am glad to hear it, Mr. Ivanov, but before we begin, let us take care of the Vow." He drew his wand and smiled just a bit as he watched the man swallow nervously.

Chapter End Notes

This story doesn't want to leave me alone, so you all get another chapter. And the longest one yet in this story because I didn't want to break up the summer into two chapters. If you missed Severus/Alioth interactions, yeah, so did I.

Next chapter: Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, and Dementors. Yay!
The final two weeks before returning to Hogwarts were spent back in England. The London townhouse at Grimmauld Place, to be exact. Alioth had a long and storied history with that house. Once upon a time, it had been the place he'd come to see his beloved godfather, which made it good. And he'd gotten away from the Dursleys there, which made it great. It had also been Sirius' prison away from prison, and then Mrs. Weasley had put them to work cleaning it up the mundane way when the adults could have done the same work with magic in a fraction of the time. That reminded him a bit too strongly of the Dursleys, and he couldn't help but resent her for it, even if he'd have never suggested such a thing at the time.

The house was also where he'd taken refuge with Ron and Hermione during what should have been their seventh year. It was in that library that Alioth had first discovered the Dark Arts. When he first understood what they were beyond the generic “evil” and "Death Eater" that he'd known about their use previously. He'd been so naïve. It was there that he'd discovered that Dark Magic was no more evil or wrong than guns or explosives or battle armor or any of that. Dark Magic wasn't evil, but it was more dangerous than light or neutral magic. Like guns or explosives, one had to respect it and handle it with care, but it was sometimes useful or even necessary.

During that time, Light wizards and witches had started getting picked off one after another as Voldemort and his supporters gained strength. The few Dark Wizards the Light had managed to subdue all just ended up getting free and going right back to it. They caught Mulciber and held him in this house. They’d questioned him with various truth potions and spells, not having access to veritaserum, nor the ingredients to brew it. They'd held him almost three weeks between questioning and trying to figure out what to do with him. Ron had thought he should go to prison, but since Voldemort presently controlled it, that was out. Hermione wanted to fully obliviate him and set him free. Alioth had wanted to kill him, or at least permanently transfigure him into an inanimate object until such a time as he could stand trial.

Hermione, in her utter conviction that she was always right, obliviated and released him in the middle of the night. She’d used a complete obliviate that worked similarly to total amnesia. He’d retain knowledge, but no memories, making him a blank slate that could rebuild his life free of the prejudices he’d grown up with.

Two months later, Mulciber slaughtered the entire Abbott family, including Hannah and her baby cousin who'd happened to be visiting. Whether someone had managed to remove the obliviate or Voldemort just found him and reminded him of everything wasn’t clear, nor did it make the Abbotts less dead.

After that, Alioth had stopped being willing to compromise for the sake of Hermione's bleeding heart or Ron's inbred sense of Light and Right.

The next time they caught a Death Eater – Travers - Alioth waited until they were done with him and then cut his throat with a cursed blade that would not allow the wound to be healed despite Hermione's frantic attempts.

It had been the beginning of the end for the three of them.

"Woah!" Alex exclaimed, shaking Alioth from his thoughts as the younger wizard entered the
"Now, see here!" The sadly familiar screech interrupted, drawing their eyes to the rather ugly harridan painted onto the canvas there. "I am the lady of this house, boy. Who are you?"

Alioth lifted an imperious eyebrow at the portrait. "You, madam, are nothing more than a bit of paint and magic. I am Alioth Black, Heir of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black. Adess."

The elf appeared at once with a pop and a bow.

"Adess, please remove this disgraceful bit of canvas to the Portrait Vault at Gringotts."

"What? How dare-"

"Silence," Alioth hissed at her, imbuing the parseltongue word with a powerful rush of magic that instantly silenced the outrage. He wasn’t sure how long the imposed silence would last, but he wasn’t particularly concerned about it either.

The Black Family elf’s magic easily removed the frame from the wall and a second later, she popped away.

Alioth sighed and relaxed considerably with that biddy gone. He hadn’t realized that the Black elves were capable of removing Black Family portraits when Grimmauld Place had been standing. He’d figured it out after he’d moved into Castle Black after the war and discovered that not only was Walburga not the worst of the family, but she also had a portrait in the castle, to which she’d apparently fled when Grimmauld was destroyed.

He gave Alex a small smile. "Moving on, then." He looked around the entry hall and shook his head. It was in better condition than the first time he’d seen it the last time around. That was largely due to the fact that he'd gotten Kreacher out of the house as soon as possible last winter and sent two sane elves to deal with restoring it. "Pick a room on the second floor," he encouraged the boy. "This house is going to undergo a major renovation, and I'll start at the top and work down."

Alex nodded curiously and headed for the stairs.

The next two weeks passed almost without notice. They didn't get out much since neither wanted to deal with anyone recognizing Harry Potter, or worse, Dumbledore getting word and commencing with his meddling. Also, Alioth’s days were rather full with the work he was commissioning on the townhouse. Happily, the Black family had house-elves that specialized in construction, so Alioth was able to work with them to get everything done rather than having to deal with wizards. It was somewhat unconventional. While plenty of wealthy families had elves with such skills, they were mostly only used to fix and maintain things as they needed it. Major renovations were generally handled with wizarding contractors, who often had house-elf labor. The difference, of course, was that what he was doing required him to speak to the elves as though they were intelligent beings and trust them to handle things without a knowledgeable wizard looking over their shoulders. Since Alioth was unusual in his ability to see the elves for what they were, he had no problem with this. He didn't doubt that Arcturus found it odd, but the old man hadn't complained or even brought it up, so he was sure that he didn't consider it worth arguing about.

When September 1st rolled around, Alex seemed completely incapable of sitting still and wouldn’t more than nibble on his breakfast.

"Which part concerns you most?" Alioth posed half an hour before they were set to leave.

Alex's shoulders slumped, and he started absently kicking at the leg of a table that was probably
more than a thousand years old. "I don't... I don't want to go back to being Harry Potter. How can
I look my friends in the eye and let them call me Harry and not say something?" he asked
plaintively.

"Well," Alioth sighed, "I suppose you'll find a way because you have to, Alex. Neither of them
can be trusted not to betray your secrets."

"They're trustworthy!" Alex objected.

Alioth shook his head, "Ron will want to go to his family for help, and Hermione will insist on
speaking to an adult about it, Alex. Believe me, they were my best friends once upon a time, too."

Alex deflated a bit at that. "Ron and Hermione? I didn't know that... You seem to really dislike
them."

"I do," Alioth confirmed. "They were very poor friends to me. They were willing to die by my
side in the end, but not to fight dirty and maybe save all our lives and countless others. And that's
not even considering the minor betrayals all through school." He stopped and shook his head, "I'm
not telling you that you can't or shouldn't be friends with them. I'm just advising you to remain
aware of their faults. Hermione believes in authority figures and that kids shouldn't fight adult
battles - not that the last is wrong, mind you, but unfortunately the world doesn't always work that
way. Ron believes in his family and in Dumbledore because it's what he's grown up to believe.
He's also jealous of your wealth and fame and that makes him an all too fickle friend.

"Regardless of how trustworthy they are, they don't know occlumency and we can't teach them
because if the word occlumency were to reach Dumbledore in association with you, it could cause
a great deal of harm."

Alex was dejectedly staring at the floor and Alioth sighed again.

"It's not forever, Alex. In a couple more years, circumstances may change. I'm not even sure how
long Dumbledore is going to be alive at this point. After his death, it would probably be safe to tell
them. If word did get out that you're not Harry Potter at that point, I'll just officially name you my
steward and then you'll be legally able to access everything involving the Potter Estate, vaults, and
lordships. No one has to know that I'm Harry Potter as long as all of the paperwork magically
checks out, no one can contest it."

Alex frowned confusedly at that, "Is that why you've been training me to be Lord Potter even
though you knew I wasn't actually... well, you?"

Alioth smiled a little. Alex had always been more astute about things like this than Alioth had been
at the same age. It was a trait that he strongly appreciated and he hoped it would help the boy to
avoid being manipulated in the future. "Yes, it is, though you needn't feel obligated if you truly
want nothing to do with Harry Potter later on. We can always expose Dumbledore's machinations
for what they are and you can go back to being Alex Jones, American, but that'll have to wait until
after Dumbledore is dead. At the moment he is far too powerful and far too dangerous to risk
pushing him that hard."

It wasn't until a few minutes before they were due to leave for King's Cross when Alex quietly
questioned, "What... do you think he'll do to me if he figures out that I know?"

Alioth turned his attention fully on Alex, realizing that he should have anticipated this line of
questioning. Alex was only thirteen years old. Of course, he was worried about what Dumbledore
could do to him. Alioth was mildly worried and he suspected that he could hold his own decently
well in a fight against the old man. He gave the question a moment of thought and then nodded to himself. “I’m going to make you a panic button,” he decided. “I don’t know what Albus might do, Alex. I really don’t. I suspect something drastic to ensure that his little weapon remains his to control. If you ever come to truly fear for your life or sanity, I’m going to make you a portkey that will take you to one of my properties. Black Palm Hall, maybe. I’ve spent enough time studying the Hogwarts wards that I suspect I can make a portkey to get through them without too much difficulty. If necessary, I’ll go down and have another look, but I don’t think I’ll have too much trouble. I’ll put it into an item that you can wear that we can charm impossible to remove by anyone but you.

“I hope that you won’t need it and I doubt that you’ll have need of it too soon. Albus likes to think himself a moral man, simply doing what must be done for the Greater Good,” he couldn’t help but sneer that hated slogan, but he kept himself on track. “He’s not going to do anything drastic until he considers it a last resort. Try not to dwell on it too much.”

Alex relaxed marginally, “You’ll get that for me soon though?”

“Within the week,” Alioth promised.

Alex was silent a moment before admitting. “I still don’t like lying to Ron and Hermione. I know… I understand why I have to. I just hate it.”

“I know,” Alioth commiserated, squeezing Alex’s shoulder encouragingly. “Think of it this way,” he suggested, “if Ron and Hermione truly care about you for who you are as a person and not because of your name… then it shouldn’t matter if they know your true identity or not. Who cares if they call you Harry or Alex or Hakim. They’re friends with you, not the Boy-Who-Lived. And if that’s not true, then they don’t deserve your honesty or your friendship.”

Alex swallowed noticeably and nodded several times, his shoulders loosening considerably. “Thanks, Alioth,” he said thickly.

“Any time,” Alioth smiled, moving his hand to Alex’s opposite shoulder to give him a one-armed hug.

Alex took that as invitation to turn into him and wrap his arms around him.

Alioth held in a sigh and returned the embrace lightly, relieved when it didn’t last very long. Not to say that he didn’t appreciate the sentiment, but touch was still rather uncomfortable for him. He hadn’t had much positive touch in his life outside of Severus and virtually nothing since Severus’ death, which had been seventeen years by Alioth’s reckoning.

The boy appeared embarrassed by his action when he drew away and he wouldn’t meet Alioth’s eyes, even after they arrived on the platform, but he was smiling. Their talk had made them a bit later to arrive than usual, so Alioth advised the young man to find a compartment before they were all taken, then headed for the prefect compartment himself.

The meeting proved even more tedious than the one the previous year. This was largely owing to the fact that Percy Weasley was Headboy this year opposite his girlfriend Penelope Clearwater of Ravenclaw as Headgirl. If Alioth had thought him pedantic and long-winded last year, it was nothing to what he could accomplish as their "leader". It was more than a little annoying, but they managed to get through it without Alioth or any of the other prefects cursing the Headboy, so he decided to call it a win.
Cedric was also among the prefects this year, Alioth couldn’t help but note. He’d seen a lot of people die – killed many of them himself – over the course of the war, but Cedric had been the first. A completely senseless death – wrong place wrong time, nothing more or less – and Alioth realized now that it definitely wouldn’t happen again. There was no saying that the boy would survive to old age, but he wouldn’t die at seventeen.

Alioth couldn’t help but wonder what the boy would make of his life now that he had the opportunity to live it.

Those thoughts didn’t occupy him long. It wasn’t as though he’d ever been close to the other boy, after all. When the meeting at last drew to a close, Alioth did not remain behind in the compartment this time, but rather tracked down Alex and settled himself into the compartment directly across the aisle from the boy. The compartment was occupied by a pair of second-year Ravenclaws, but they proved their intelligence by vacating within thirty seconds of Alioth settling in. He hadn’t even had to do anything more than stare at them thoughtfully for them to get the message.

With the place to himself, Alioth found a journal in his robe and set to designing the spell matrix that would go into the pendant he’d promised to make for Alex. Or perhaps he’d just go all out and create a matrix of matrices. It would be much more complex, obviously, but he’d done enough similar work in the past – particularly during the war – that he was sure he could put something together in a week. It would allow him to add much more depth to the enchantments. Not just a portkey with a non-removable feature and a notification for Alioth should it ever be used. He could add in a protection matrix… or maybe two, which could cast minor healing spells as well as shields and alerts and also one for detecting potions and nullifying some of the weaker ones. During the war, they’d created pedants and bracelets and rings and such with expanded space inside that actually held a few basic potions, which the enchantment would dispense into the wearer if certain conditions were met. It was able to provide much more effective healing and antidotes than a simple spell matrix and it didn’t drain the wearer to use them. The downside, of course, was that they needed to be replenished when they ran out, but if they were actually needed, there was no substitute.

Hm. A diagnostic and alert matrix that would assess the boy’s health at all times and send an alert to Alioth if it became too low. A mind matrix to boost the boy’s occlumency shields. He was good and getting better, but he wasn’t ready to take on a forceful assault by a master Legilimens yet.

That was six matrices, which he could put together in a neat rectangular prism matrix. It was a sturdy enchantment build, but it would be much stronger if he added one more enchantment and made it a hexagonal pyramid. Seven was the most powerful magical number, after all, and the pyramid was very difficult to breech. Considering that this was meant primarily to protect Alex from Dumbledore, but also certain overzealous Death Eaters, Alioth didn’t think overkill would be a bad thing. He could probably add another matrix entirely devoted to the security of the pendant to ensure that it couldn’t be removed, but also make it extremely difficult to damage and a form of notice-me-not so that no one would pay it any attention in the first place. The base of the pyramid would probably be the mind matrix. Alex’s occlumency, while good, wasn’t yet up to the standard of reliably fooling Dumbledore if the man went snooping around. Plus, he wasn’t much of a liar or actor, so it may be best of the matrix allowed immediately harmless compulsions to take root, but then eroded them within perhaps a quarter of an hour so that Dumbledore wouldn’t notice anything amiss. All of that would take a much more complex matrix and it would hold the base of the pyramid well.

He’d need a powerful medium to hold so much magic in such a small item over an extended period
of time, so it would definitely need a gemstone. Something hard. Diamond would do, but the crystalline structure wasn’t ideal for anchoring a hexagonal pyramid spell matrix. Ruby would do better with it’s hexagonal crystal structure. Five carats at minimum, though closer to ten might be better…

Alioth worked steadily through the majority of the ride. When the train began to slow and the air began to drastically cool, Alioth actually jumped in surprise. Obviously, he’d been expecting it since Sirius was on the loose and the Ministry still as brain-dead as ever, but he’d well and truly lost track of time. Someday, Magick willing, he’d be able to devote himself completely to Severus and complex magic. If he could while away his life with his love creating complicated spells, enchantments, and potions, he was sure that he’d never want for anything more.

But that was in the future. Right now, there were dementors to deal with.

Closing his journal, he tucked it back into his pocket with his new fountain pen, which he’d found in a magical market in New York over summer. He then drew his wand and proceeded across the aisle into Alex’s compartment.

Remus was in the compartment with Alex, Hermione, and Ron. Alioth couldn’t help but stare at the man in slight disbelief. There was no way it was a coincidence that the trio had ended up in this compartment with him. Not when Alioth and Alex had arrived plenty early enough for the boy to have found them an empty one. Which meant…

Alioth flexed his magic a little and detected Dumbledore’s magic. It was subtle enough that he’d not noticed it until he’d specifically looked for it and he didn’t have the time to properly investigate it at the moment but he strongly suspected a lure tied to Alex’s magic.

Alioth wondered if he’d somehow gotten the Dementors to search the train as well, though perhaps it was more likely that he’d merely heard or suspected that the Ministry planned to do it and took advantage of the fact.

“Alioth?” Alex asked warily.

Alioth took a moment to kick Remus’ leg to wake him. The man startled and looked up at him through puffy eyes, which then darted around the compartment, taking everything in. It had been a full moon last night, so Alioth supposed he couldn’t blame the man for his exhaustion.

“What’s happening?” Hermione asked uncertainly.

“Dementors,” Alioth replied evenly, for it was getting very cold and the sick feeling of despair was already beginning to gather, so it wasn’t unbelievable that he’d have discerned the cause already.

Remus’ eyes widened at the single word and he stood just as the lights went out.

Alioth cast a lumos and Remus followed suit only a moment later.

“Stay here,” he instructed, eyeing Alioth warily for a moment, then excited the compartment, closing the door securely behind him.

“Dementors?” Alex demanded immediately. “What are they doing here?” He lit his own wand with a quiet spell and Hermione and Ron finally seemed to get a hint and light their own.

“What do they want with us?!” Ron demanded fearfully, all but pressing his face to the window.

Before more could be said, the compartment door began to slide open and the feeling of icy despair
rapidly multiplied. The cold didn't bother Alioth, being that he wasn't actually alive, but the
despair affected him just fine as that targeted the soul, not the body or mind. He'd had much more
experience thinking and functioning through despair than the children though. He cast a swift,
"Expecto Patronum," in a firm tone of voice and watched as the compartment became filled with a
silvery thestral - his patronus since his death.

The children jumped in fright at the appearance whereas the dementor in the doorway let out an
inhuman shriek - something that had little to do with vocal chords - and fled back down the
corridor. "Get them all off the train," Alioth instructed his patronus, snapping the door shut again
once it was out.

"What was that?" Hermione asked, her voice trembling as she slowly lowered her hands from her
ears.

"My patronus," Alioth answered curtly as he turned his attention to Alex, who was an absolutely
pasty white. "Are you okay, Harry?" he asked gently.

The boy shuddered slightly, looking up to meet his eyes. He swallowed particularly hard, as
though he was trying to keep something from coming up. "I heard my parents dying," he
whispered, though it was loud enough to carry around the silent compartment.

Alioth heard Hermione gasp and resisted the urge to shake his head at the bleeding-heart little fool.
She had no end of sympathy for everyone in the world who ever suffered - and even those she only
imagined to have suffered - but she'd never been willing to do what needed doing to prevent future
tragedy and injustice.

Sadly, Alioth knew exactly what it was like to experience the deaths of parents he didn't know
when he was that age. And Alex had been much older when his parents died, so it was doubtlessly
even more traumatic.

Before any more could be said, Remus rushed back into the compartment, the fear in his face
quickly being replaced by relief when he saw that everyone was okay. "Is everyone alright?" he
asked anyway.

Hermione answered the teacher promptly, of course, while Alioth gripped Alex's shoulder in a
gesture that he hoped was comforting to the boy as he honestly didn't think he was ready to endure
another hug just yet.

Remus retrieved a bar of chocolate from his pocket and began breaking off pieces and handing
them out. The children each accepted a piece and began nibbling it while Alioth politely refused
one. Cocoa beans did actually have magical properties which nourished the magical core.
Muggles didn't have enough magic to notice more than a slight uptick in mood, but magicals had
used various food and drink made from cocoa beans to ease distress and magical illnesses for
millennia. It was even an ingredient in most healing potions, so it wasn't surprising that Remus ate
so much chocolate. It probably brought him some relief from his wolf-induced pain and
exhaustion.

Alioth's patronus returned then and he knew that it wouldn't have unless the train was clear. The
thing was large enough that part of its body was inside the wall. Alioth patted it on the snout, the
creature feeling physically present to him despite the evidence that it wasn't actually a
physical being, and allowed it to fade away.

When he looked back, he wasn't surprised to find Remus staring at him intently. It was quite rare
to have a magical creature as a patronus, though what it meant was still heavily contested as so few
people ever developed a fully-fledged patronus that it was difficult to draw conclusions. Some said only those with a very powerful magical core could have a magical creature patronus. Others speculated that it had more to do with the strength of one's mind, convictions, or even soul. What was agreed upon pretty much universally, was that there was something more than the average magus to these individuals.

Personally, Alioth strongly suspected that his patronus was related to the fact that he was dead and/or the Master of Death. He'd never heard of a vampire having a patronus or what form it may have taken, but vampires were a significant minority of the magical population and they tended to keep to themselves due to prejudice against them, so it didn't necessarily mean anything.

"I'm right across the corridor if you need anything," Alioth directed at Alex, who gave a weak smile and nod in return. Alioth added a polite, "Professor," and a nod to Remus before taking his leave of the compartment. The man should be able to answer any questions the children had about what had just happened.

Two days into term, Severus kept Alioth after his first potions lesson, which Alioth hadn't quite expected, but it definitely perked up his day very effectively. Despite all the distractions over the summer, he'd still missed seeing Severus a very great deal. It helped considerably that he had the connection through the Mark Severus wore. Alioth deliberately avoided imposing any of the more invasive uses of it, but he was able to monitor the man's health. Just knowing for certain that he was okay and that the Mark would protect him was enough to take a considerable load off his mind. He knew Severus' life wasn't as fragile now that he was linked to Alioth, but he still found himself constantly worrying that something would happen. His sanity hadn't survived completely intact when Severus died, but he was certain that he'd lose what remained if he had to endure that again.

When the rest of the students had vacated, Severus cast his usual locking and silencing wards on the door before turning his full attention to Alioth - always a heady experience.

"Black," Severus began blandly. "Are you aware of the fact that Potter disappeared for the entirety of the summer?"

Alioth let his brow rise as though in surprise, "He was with me, Professor," he said innocently. "I had dinner with his guardians shortly after summer began and they both gave their consent for Harry to spend the summer with me."

Severus looked less than surprised, but considerably exasperated now. "You are aware, Black, that the Dark Lord is almost certainly back at this point given what happened at the end of your fourth year."

"Yes, Professor," Alioth agreed.

Severus' jaw clenched attractively as he glared at Alioth, "And you are familiar with the fact that the Dark Lord has something of an enmity toward the boy..." he trailed off as though inviting Alioth to draw the obvious conclusions.

"I'm aware that there's some history there," Alioth agreed, and continued before Severus could burst a blood vessel, "I understand the risks, Professor. I wasn't concerned for two reasons. First, we spent very little time in Britain over the summer and the countries that we traveled to have never had a Death Eater presence or sympathizers of the Dark Lord. Also, when we were in this country, our time was spent entirely behind powerful Black Family wards. Second, if the Dark Lord has, indeed, used the Philosopher's Stone to return himself to physical form, I believe it is
almost certain that his sanity has been regained. The Stone would undoubtedly negate any insanity caused by excessive misuse of Dark Magic. Given that fact, I doubt that he's all that interested in Harry at this point, but even if he was, I suspect he'd have made a move by now."

Severus stared at him silently for a long moment before venturing, "You seem incredibly well-informed on the subject, Black."

Alioth smiled a little at Severus. "I make it a point to keep myself informed about such things," was his response.

Severus’ eyes narrowed and his lips thinned in evident irritation.

Alioth sighed. It seemed that Severus was not in a very good mood and Alioth certainly didn’t want to add to that. "What do you want me to say, Professor?" he appealed.

Those dark eyes hardened for a moment before the man bit out, "The truth would be nice, Black."

Though Alioth had not lied – technically - the man obviously knew that he was obfuscating. Though Alioth did not think the man was necessarily ready for the whole truth, perhaps more of it was in order at this point. "The Dark Lord used Horcruxes to keep himself from dying – entirely. He started creating them when he was sixteen and he made a total of six of them before his temporary fall. The nature of that magic drove him slowly but surely insane as it would to anyone. The nature of the Elixir of Life, to my understanding, is such pure magic that I have very little doubt in its ability to counteract the corrupted magic that is horcruxes. The result of which would be that the man would be rendered sane so long as he continued to take the Elixir with regularity. From what I know of the man Tom Riddle was before he became Voldemort, he would be intelligent enough to recognize that for what it was and use it. Therefore it is my belief that he is and will remain sane for the foreseeable future. What that means in terms of his ultimate goals I could only speculate, but I think if he meant Harry any harm, we’d know about it by now."

Severus stared at Alioth, his face a blank mask for a long moment before he gave a slight nod. He took a visible breath before speaking. "I suppose there is no need for me to point out the enemies you may make if you persist in this ‘friendship’ with Potter?"

“No, sir,” Alioth assured.

With a visibly stifled sigh, Severus waved his wand at the door to bring down the wards, “That is all, Black.”

“Good day, sir,” Alioth gave him a small but warm smile before departing.

Alioth left the potions classroom with a much lightened heart despite the fact he'd be a little bit late in meeting Alex. He took a few shortcuts to minimize how late he was and arrived at the designated empty lecture hall only a few minutes after he should have had he left Potions on time. Alex was already there, seated on a window ledge looking bored and maybe a little depressed.

“How have you been since we’ve been back?” Alioth inquired once he’d put up the requisite wards.

Alex sighed heavily, "Okay, I guess. I feel a little schizophrenic, though. Over the summer, I remembered a lot about being Alex. Now, since I've been back here, I feel more like Harry Potter because that's who everyone thinks I am and treats me as. It's like I've lived the first eleven years of my life twice as two completely different people and it's really hard to sort that out."

Alioth nodded sympathetically, "I wish I could tell you something that would help with that, but I
don't think there's anything to be done about it except to give it time. Eventually, you'll learn to reconcile the two sets of memories and, with your occlumency, I suspect you'll be able to put everything in the proper perspective."

Alex nodded glumly.

"In the meantime," Alioth said more brightly, "I'm going to teach you the Patronus Charm."

"Like you did against the Dementors?" Alex perked up at the prospect of learning new magic.

"Precisely," Alioth gave a small smile. "It's a bit of a difficult spell - considered Auror level, actually - but I don't think you'll have too much problem with it. You're magically powerful, which is half the battle, and your mind is organized and disciplined thanks to your Occlumency skill, which is the other half. Now, there are two different kinds of patronus. A corporeal Patronus and a noncorporeal patronus or a patronus shield. The patronus shield is, as the name suggests, a mono-dimensional shield which forms at the tip of your wand and keeps dementors from approaching you. With enough power, they can become omnidirectional, but they can't do much more than keep them from touching you or taking your soul. A corporeal patronus, on the other hand, takes the shape of your spirit animal. That's the type that I cast. They're considerably more difficult to cast, but also much more effective. They are powerful enough that dementors actually flee from them."

"What's a spirit animal, exactly?" Alex wondered.

“A spirit animal, in this case is an animal conjured from your magic rather than by your magic. You don’t get to choose the form. You cast a patronus by conjuring your very happiest memories and channeling your magic through that memory or occasionally collection of memories. For this reason, the form of the patronus is dependent upon both your magic and the memory used. Thus, if you choose a new memory or undergo something profound enough that your definition of happiness changes, your patronus form tends to change as well. It can also be influenced by what you equate with safety and protection. When I was a child, for example, my patronus took the form of a stag because it had been my father’s animagus form and on some very deep level, I equated my father with safety. Also, my happiest memory then was of my parents even though it was more a fantasy than a memory considering I had no real recollection of them.”

“What about your patronus now?” Alex queried. “You said it was a thestral, right? Hermione said that thestrals are carnivorous horse-like creatures with wings like a bat but that they’re invisible to anyone who hasn’t seen someone die. She had to look them up after you mentioned them,” he shrugged.

Alioth resisted the urge to roll his eyes and did his best to think of Hermione as the girl she was now rather than the woman who had turned her back on him when he’d needed her most. “Yes, my patronus now is a thestral.”

“When did it change?” the curious boy pressed innocently.

“It changed the day that Dumbledore’s plans for me culminated in the simultaneous deaths of sixty-seven people, including the Dark Lord and the love of my life. The spell that I cast to kill the Dark Lord took the lives of every single one of his Marked followers and it took my life as well. I remained in the land of the living due to an outside influence that I’d prefer not to discuss at the moment. I was the only one so lucky.”

Alex, wisely, didn’t pry.
Alioth took a deep breath and pressed on. “All right, then. First things first, take a few minutes to go through your memories and try to find the very happiest one. It can be a content happiness, a fierce joy, wondrous excitement… Just remember that it has to be as powerful as possible or it won’t be enough to shape the spell beyond a basic shield.”

Alex nodded decisively and settled down in a conjured chair to start digging through his memories.

Alioth knocked lightly on the door to the Defense professor’s office after dinner one night a couple weeks into term. He’d received a note at dinner asking to meet, which was honestly making him incredibly curious.

He didn’t have long to wait before the door opened to a smiling werewolf who politely invited him inside, then closed the door behind him. Though he was very subtle about it, Alioth still felt the rise of silencing wards. Interesting.

“Mr. Black,” Lupin greeted politely, gesturing toward a pair of chairs in front of the fireplace rather than those in front of his desk. Once they were seated adjacent to each other, Lupin began. “I’m sure you’re curious as to why you’ve been summoned by a professor for a class you don’t even take,” he smiled.

“It had crossed my mind, Professor,” Alioth replied genially.

“Well,” Lupin sighed. “First off, I was curious why you weren’t taking my NEWT class. Your records indicate that you were at the top of the class your first five years.”

Alioth smiled a little sardonically, “I was at the top of all of my classes my first five years. Frankly, the instruction in this class has been so utterly abysmal these last five years that I couldn’t bear to endure it again. I’ll admit that rumors about your teaching have been very positive so far, but I have no need of a Defense NEWT, so I remain content with my decision.”

Lupin nodded thoughtfully, “Can I ask what you intend to do after you graduate?”

“The bulk of my time will be spent learning to management of the Black Estate,” Alioth admitted, “and I’m certain I’ll never have either time or need of a career as it were. Beyond my duties, my interests lay in spellcrafting, primarily.”

Lupin’s smile turned wistful, “I enjoyed spellcrafting as a boy, myself. My friends and I came up with some pretty incredible things.”

With the Marauder’s Map tucked safely in an expanded pocket, Alioth couldn’t doubt that assertion.

It was only a moment more before Lupin seemed to pull himself together again. “Well, my second question for you was actually about your creature status,” he said, meeting Alioth’s eyes levelly and watching closely.

Alioth lifted a curious eyebrow, “What about it?” he inquired, curious as to what the werewolf had discovered. He honestly hadn’t even considered Lupin’s werewolf traits causing him trouble. Likely, he should have.

“You’re some form of undead,” Lupin said bluntly.

Alioth’s brow furrowed irritably, “Please don’t tell me that you can smell that.”
Lupin held back most of a chuckle, “I can, actually.”

Alioth sighed dramatically. First Ahsura and now Lupin. It was enough to give a guy a complex. It wasn’t as though he didn’t shower every day. Perhaps he ought to think about using a mild cologne of some form. “Unfortunately, you’re not the first person to tell me that,” he grumbled. “You’re a werewolf, yes?”

Lupin nodded with only slight unease at the admission visible in his body language. “Since I was a boy, yes. How long for you?”

“Since I was eight,” which was true…ish. “I use a specialized growth potion to keep my body aging alongside my peers.”

Lupin gave a pensive nod, “Can I ask what, exactly, you are?”

Alioth gave a small shrug, “Unique,” he settled on. “To my knowledge there are no others like me. I can take a lot more physical damage than a living human and suffer no lasting harm. Food and sleep are optional. As far as I can tell, I’m sustained entirely through magic. You needn’t worry, I don’t have any bad habits like drinking blood or eating brains or turning into a wild beast that might endanger anyone.”

Lupin gave a micro-flinch at the “wild beast” comment, but only nodded in response to the assurance. “Does anyone else know about your state?”

“Just my father,” Alioth admitted.

“Not the headmaster?” Lupin pressed.

“Historically, Hogwarts is not especially tolerant of magical creatures, Professor. Though I understand – and you are proof – that the headmaster sometimes looks the other way, I very much doubt he’d extend the same courtesy to the Black Heir as to the son of a famous retired auror.”

Lupin swallowed visibly, “You’re familiar with my history.”

“I looked you up when I realized a werewolf was teaching at Hogwarts, yes.”

Lupin pursed his lips, but let that go. He hesitated a moment, then took a breath. “There was one other thing I wanted to discuss, but I will give you my word that I won’t bring your creature status to the headmaster’s attention unless I believe it to be absolutely necessary for the health and safety of the students here.”

“I appreciate that,” Alioth acknowledged and passive legilimency was enough to confirm that he meant the promise. Given what he knew of Lupin’s character, he was willing to trust him. If anyone knew the value of keeping such a secret, it was him. “What else did you want to discuss?”

“Mr. Potter, actually. He mentioned that you were a close friend after the incident on the train.”

“Yes,” Alioth confirmed. “We’ve spent the last two summers together. We’re very close.”

“May I assume you’re familiar with a creature called a boggart?” Lupin inquired.

“Yes, of course,” Alioth agreed, beginning to get an idea of where this was going. “I heard that you’d exposed your third years to one of them. What’s it to do with Harry?”

Lupin sighed, “I chose third year for the boggart lesson intentionally in hopes that the children
would be mature enough to handle it, but young enough to have fairly basic fears. Nothing too traumatic that would have given nightmares to the entire class. I… I wasn’t so sure that this applied to Harry, so I didn’t let him confront the boggart in front of the rest of the class. After everyone else had left, I asked him if he wanted to try it, and he did.”

“…yes?” Alioth prompted when Lupin hesitated for a long moment.

“You say that you know him very well,” Lupin finally continued. “Do you think you could guess at his boggart?”

Alioth leaned back in his chair and brought his hands together in his lap, idly tapping his fingers together as he considered the query. Fire, he supposed, was a possibility. Alex had said that he’d experienced the deaths of his parents when the dementors got near. Dementors were also a possibility if he feared fear itself that way that Alioth had at that age. He doubted that either one would be something Remus would feel the need to bring to him, though.

In Alioth’s first experience, Remus had seemed impressed that his greatest fear was fear itself. And fire he’d likely attribute to James and Lily’s deaths as the room had caught fire after Voldemort’s failed curse. Which meant the answer was probably the other possibility. Honestly, it wasn’t surprising if he really thought about it. If he’d been through what Alex had at that age, it would undoubtedly have been his greatest fear as well.

“Dumbledore,” he said with quiet certainty.

Lupin nodded, his brow furrowed and lips tight in frustration. “Dumbledore,” he agreed.

“Needless to say, I’d be more than a little concerned to find the headmaster as the greatest fear of any student in this school. The fact that it’s Harry Potter – a boy with no obvious reason to fear Albus Dumbledore – makes me considerably more concerned. The fact that you could guess at the fear suggests that you likely know the reason for it.”

“I do,” Alioth admitted for it was quite obvious.

Lupin stared at him a moment before taking what looked like a calming breath and turning his gaze toward the fire, “But you’re not going to tell me.”

“Such truths have a great deal of power, Professor Lupin,” Alioth explained. “In the wrong hands, they could cause untold damage.”

“And in the right hands, they could protect a thirteen-year-old boy,” Lupin countered firmly.

“They are already in the right hands,” Alioth promised. “I’ve been looking after Harry and protecting him since he started Hogwarts and I will continue to do so as long as there remains a need.”

Lupin’s hands clenched into tight fists for a moment before he carefully stretched them out once more and lifted his eyes back to Alioth, “I have to know why he needs protecting from the headmaster.”

Alioth gave that a moment of thought, but what he knew of Remus Lupin strongly suggested that he would guard Harry with his life, so a bit of information probably wouldn’t hurt. “Albus Dumbledore sees the world as a game of chess, Professor. Everyone in it is a game piece. Pawns and bishops and knights and rooks. All valuable to a point. All expendable if necessary. Even himself, because he’s not playing to put himself in a position of power. He’s playing the Light against the Dark. So long as the white king prevails, every other piece on the board can fall. Harry’s his queen. A very valuable piece – the most important, even, aside from the king. So he’s
spent Harry’s whole life making sure his queen is moved into the perfect position. And when the
time is right, Harry will be sacrificed in order to defeat the black king.

“Harry’s not a child to him. He’s a weapon. Harry knows that and he knows that, right now,
Dumbledore’s a greater threat to him than Voldemort ever was. The Dark Lord only ever tried to
take his life. Dumbledore will take everything else.”

Lupin was quiet for a long moment before finally asking, his voice a quiet rasp, “How can you
possibly know all of this?”

“My father is a very intelligent man,” Alioth explained, which was true. “He’s never supported a
Dark Lord or a Light one. He believes only in building and strengthening his family. As you’re no
doubt aware, the war between Voldemort and Dumbledore has nearly destroyed my family in the
last few decades. My father has been collecting information and consolidating his losses for
decades. I am his heir – his means of continuing the Black family,” also all true. “I am very well
informed on Dumbledore’s doings and the Dark Lord’s, and I promise you that Dumbledore’s
belief in the prophecy concerning Harry and Voldemort is far more likely to kill Harry than the
Dark Lord, who has been ignoring the prophecy and Harry himself since his return a year ago.”

Lupin had flinched slightly at the mention of the prophecy. “You know about the prophecy?” he
asked incredulously.

“The entirety of it,” Alioth confirmed, “and I know that it is very widely open to interpretation.
Dumbledore chose a meaning to attribute to it when he heard it and he has been working diligently
to make it come true ever since. The way I see it, if it even applies to Harry and Voldemort, which
is not clear, it could have been completed on Halloween 1981 when Voldemort’s body was
destroyed. Trying to force Harry to kill a Dark Lord fifty years his senior is not only horrific but
absurd and will more than likely end in Harry’s death.

“So, yes. I have been protecting him since his arrival at Hogwarts and I will continue to do so. If
you want to help, I would highly advise that you keep this and anything else unusual you may
notice far from Dumbledore’s ears.”

Lupin hesitated a moment, then took a deep breath, “I won’t tell him anything, Mr. Black. If
you’ve done your homework, I suppose you know that my interest in Harry isn’t merely as his
professor.”

“You were very good friends with his parents, yes, I’m aware,” Alioth agreed. “I’d not have told
you a fraction of that had I not known it.”

Lupin smiled a little ruefully. “Of course.”

“If that was all, Professor,” Alioth flicked his wand in a silent tempus, “I need to start my rounds in
a few minutes.”

“Yes, of course,” Lupin agreed, rising as Alioth did to walk him to the door.

No more words were exchanged as Alioth let himself out.

Severus flinched at the sudden icy wash of magic that was the wards informing him that some
really serious Dark magic had just been cast in his dungeons. He was out of his seat before
bothering to think about rising. He ignored the slash of red ink across the essay he’d been marking
and drew his wand as he ran for the door. He raced down the corridors, which were blessedly
vacant as it was very nearly curfew.
It took him only a dozen or so seconds before he was approaching the location the wards had indicated and he slowed to a quick but quiet walk, unsure what he was about to thrust himself into.

He stopped in surprise when the scene that appeared around the corner wasn’t a pair of his Slytherins dueling or one student tormenting another. Rather Alioth Black was crouched over an unconscious seventh year Slytherin, Warren Carrow, chanting a minor healing spell. Severus allowed him to finish, carefully scanning the area for any signs of a threat.

When Alioth finished, he stood with a sigh and glanced around the empty corridor as well. There were no spying portraits this far down, at least, and the late hour had kept other students away.

“What happened?” Severus demanded, unable to ignore the residue of Dark magic in the air. It was thick and stringent in a way that reminded him woefully of the Unforgiveable curses.

“He attacked me,” Alioth said with a nod toward the unconscious boy. “I don’t wish to report it or complain about it, though. He wasn’t in his right mind.”

Severus lifted a curious eyebrow at that assertion. “Was he confunded?”

“Much worse than that, I’m afraid,” Alioth sighed and tipped his head toward the boy again.

Severus watched him a moment longer, then moved to crouch in front of his student, tipping his face up and using a simple wandless charm to open his eyes. It took but a thought to fall inside. Scrolling through the most recent events was simple enough until he tried to find the reason he’d decided to attack Alioth. There was no clear reason but there was a clear need to not only attack or harm but to kill Alioth Black. The compulsion was neatly done and would undoubtedly be very difficult to detect as it was already fading into the boy’s mind, becoming almost indistinguishable from his natural thoughts. Figuring out who was responsible for it would be impossible, but that alone ensured the list of possibilities was quite short.

Once he’d ascertained the compulsion Alioth had hinted at, Severus took a moment to actually view what had occurred down here. His heart all but stopped in his chest as he saw Carrow watch Alioth walk by, then lift his wand at the younger boy’s back while Carrow was still shrouded in concealment spells. “Avada Kedavra,” he cast in a clear, quiet tone, and the acid green spell leapt from his wand and slammed right into Alioth’s back just as he was beginning to turn.

Rather than dropping dead as any reasonable person may expect someone hit with the Killing Curse to do, Alioth Black didn’t even seem to notice it. With just an irritable frown, he sidestepped a dark severing curse and flicked his wand almost negligently, much like one may bat aside a troublesome fly. If it was a spell, it was one Severus didn’t know. Despite Alioth’s acknowledged skill for spellcraft, Severus honestly thought it more likely that the move had been a simple application of raw magical force that slammed right through Carrow’s shield and tossed the boy into the stone wall like a ragdoll.

The memory ended there as the boy was obviously rendered unconscious by the blow.

Severus drew himself from Carrow’s mind and let his eyes slide closed again. He turned his head in time to see Alioth erase the record of the Unforgiveable from Carrow’s wand with a spell that wasn’t supposed to be known outside the DMLE and was illegal to use if you weren’t a member of said department.

Severus somehow wasn’t surprised that Alioth knew the spell, though he did appreciate the fact that Alioth obviously didn’t intend to punish Carrow for the deadly attack. Warren Carrow was a
bit of a bully and not widely liked even within Slytherin house. He knew there were a number of his snakes who’d have used the opportunity to hurt the boy. That Alioth didn’t seem to have even considered it impressed Severus at least as much as the show of force he’d displayed in that memory.

The fact that he’d survived a Killing Curse to the back wasn’t so much impressive as unnerving and intriguing. It made Severus think that there was a lot more to the fact that the Mark on his arm now represented the Deathly Hallows than Dumbledore would have him think. Whatever Dumbledore said about being certain that he could not be the Master of Death, Severus’ reservations were growing.

“You don’t intend to press charges,” Severus observed, “so what do you intend to do about the fact that someone just tried to kill you?” he posed.

Alioth sighed and it turned to a rueful laugh halfway through, “Nothing at the moment, I suppose.”

“Black!”

Alioth gave him a fond smile which was absolutely fucking infuriating at the moment, “What would you suggest I do, Professor? Inform the headmaster that a compelled student tried to kill me – not that I can prove he was compelled. Shall I suggest he begin the investigation with all the skilled Legilimens in the school? Perhaps he can interrogate himself on the matter? I somehow doubt he’d find anything. Or perhaps I could go to the DMLE with accusations of foul play that have absolutely no evidence to support them. Depending on who I approached, I’d either be laughed out of the office or Carrow would be arrested and charged for the crime.”

Severus did not miss the rather blunt accusation against Albus in that rant. He seriously wished that he could dismiss it out of hand, but he really couldn’t. His faith in Albus had never been spectacular but even that had been eroding rather quickly the last couple of years. And he was well aware of how much of the old man’s negative attention had been focused on Alioth since he’d begun growing close to Potter.

“All I can do is to take extra precautions and watch my back for now.” He seemed to hesitate a moment before adding, “I will, however, be investigating a more long-term solution.”

Severus gave a few seconds to wondering just what the young man meant by *that*, but decided that speculating on it wasn’t going to be helpful at present. He’d just keep his eye out for any possible evolutions of that vague statement.

Severus waited until Alioth left before entering Carrow’s mind again and eradicating the compulsion and his memory of attacking the other student. Then he went a bit deeper and carefully implanted another compulsion, this one compelling him to seek out Severus and request help immediately should another dangerous compulsion be placed on him. It was a tricky piece of work and unlikely to be discovered unless someone was looking for it specifically, but it wouldn’t harm him if it was never needed. Finally, he woke the confused boy and sent him on to the common room as it was now after curfew.

After getting hit in the back with a Killing Curse, Alioth took a few more precautions with regard to his personal protection, pulling out some spells he hadn’t used since the war. The most important was a personal ward that he and Hermione had developed before their falling out. It was usually cast on a belt buckle as the metal held the spell better than leather or cloth and the central location of the belt on the body made it easy to apply the ward to the entire body without
covering anything extra. It could block low and mid-level attacks, which they’d adopted from Fred and George’s shield hats, but more importantly, it expanded and heightened his awareness of his immediate surroundings, drawing his attention to the presence of any spells active around him, fading somewhat with distance. The spell was a little exhausting to use all the time, but it beat a severing curse to the back. With his luck, the next attack would have him taking a Killing Curse in front of witnesses. He was certain Dumbledore would leap at the excuse to expel him if he found out Alioth was undead, which would undoubtedly come out in the inquiry following such an incident.

Luckily, he didn’t have to worry about poison as his body was dead and didn’t actually metabolize anything he ate anyway. Some types of potions would work on him, but they either had to be designed specifically for undead or they had to act directly on one’s magic. Since no one outside Arcturus Black and Remus Lupin currently knew that he was dead, he wasn’t too worried about the former. As to the latter, he had a decent chance of resisting the effects of most of those considering the size of his magical core.

Despite ramping up his awareness and paranoia, he didn’t let the incident bother him too much. He was hardly unaccustomed to people trying to kill him, after all. It was almost making him nostalgic.

Not that that was preventing him from finally putting real thought into Dumbledore’s rapidly approaching end. Part of him wanted to make it dramatic and painful. Part of him wanted to publicly shred his image first. Most of him was practical enough to just want the man dead before he got the chance to hurt anyone else that Alioth cared about. Killing him quickly and quietly would be much smarter. Then, if someone say... anonymously hired some investigators to dig up every bit of dirt in the old man’s long life and make sure it found its way to where it could do the most damage... Well, Albus would be too dead to do anything about it.

On the other hand, if he drew it out, made a point to enrage the old man, and someone he cared about was hurt because of it... It didn’t bear thinking about. He was really feeling positive about the way things were going this time around and he didn’t want to have to try to go back and start over now, which he would if Severus was hurt or – gods forbid – killed. Surprisingly, he thought he might take extreme measures to keep Alex safe as well. The boy had somehow wormed his way into Alioth’s cold, still heart.

It was that realization that led him to pull Alex away from his friends before breakfast on Halloween. “Someone in this school is trying to kill me,” Alioth decided to start bluntly since they didn’t have that long lest they miss breakfast entirely. “I’m relatively certain it’s Dumbledore,” he added before Alex could recover enough from his shock to comment.

Alex closed his mouth on whatever he’d been about to say and swallowed hard. “Do you know why?” he finally asked.

“I can only speculate,” Alioth sighed, “but I suspect he’s decided extreme measures are necessary to get me out of your life.”

“He’s doing this because we’re friends,” Alex bit out, his ire somewhat impressive for a thirteen-year-old.

“He’s doing this because I’m endangering the manipulations he’s been planning for you since before you were born,” Alioth corrected. “Now, I don’t really expect that you’re in any great danger, but the fact that Albus is trying to kill me means that he’s getting a bit desperate. I don’t... I don’t know what he might try to do to force us apart if his attempts to kill me fail – which they obviously will. The amulet I gave you is a good start and will get you away from him,
but only if you know that you’re in danger. Living here at Hogwarts, you can’t be expected to be on your guard from every avenue he may use against you at all times. There’s simply too many.”

He moved on quickly when he noticed how the boy had started to pale, “Not to worry, however. I have devised a means of protecting you absolutely, but…” he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It’s a touch… invasive. And… permanent.”

Alex frowned at him curiously, “Permanent? You mean it would make you protect me for like the rest of our lives?”

“Yes,” Alioth admitted. “Not that I’d consider it a hardship, Alex.”

The boy’s shoulder’s dropped a little in evident relief at the sound of his real name. “What do we have to do?” he inquired.

Alioth was only mildly surprised by the quick acquiescence. Teenagers weren’t known for their foresight or deep grasp of permanence. He’d almost feel badly about using that to his advantage if not for the fact that he was doing this to protect Alex and was making sure he couldn’t later abuse it even if he wanted to. “There’s an exchange of oaths and then I’ll use a spell that will form the permanent link between us based on those oaths. It will appear like a tattoo on your skin. I can’t control what the tattoo comes out looking like. It’s a bit like the corporeal patronus in that way. The form is based on who and what I am. It won’t be overly large and we can place it anywhere that you wish, though I’d heavily advise against putting it somewhere easily observed. Avoid the arms and legs, for example, if you wish to wear shorts or short-sleeved t-shirts in future.”

“Why can’t anyone see it?” Alex asked curiously but entirely without suspicion.

Alioth sighed and conjured a pair of chairs. Apparently, this was going to take a little while yet, but he supposed he’d be better served with transparency in this case. He didn’t need Alex learning certain facts later and drawing incorrect conclusions. He sat in one chair and waited for Alex to take the other before explaining. “The Dark Lord marks all of his followers with a tattoo in a similar manner. He puts the marks on the inside of the left forearm.”

“You… what?” Alex blinked, stunned.

“The method of the marking is similar, Alex, but the marks only hold the link between us. The function of the marks depends upon the oaths given when it is emplaced. The Dark Lord makes his followers give themselves to him entirely. They become his property and he offers nothing in return. He uses the marks to ensure his own life at the expense of theirs. I will use your mark to protect your life with my own. It is very, very different. Do you understand?”

Alex blinked a few times and stared at his hands in his lap, his brow furrowed as he absently rubbed one thumb rhythmically against the palm of his opposite hand. “Will it…” he said finally, pausing to swallow before starting again, “Will it hurt you? If I’m… hurt?”

“It may not be entirely pleasant,” Alioth admitted, “but it will cause me no permanent harm, I assure you.”

Alex took a deep breath and curled his lower lip into his mouth to gnaw on. “What are the oaths?”

Alioth smiled a bit and drew a piece of parchment from his robe where he’d worked out their oaths previously. The oaths were obviously weighted in Alex’s favor. Alioth was doing this to protect
his friend and wasn’t asking a favor in return. They also ensured a degree of security for them both.

Alex stared at the parchment long enough that he must have read through the words carefully at least twice. Alioth was glad to see his caution. The severity of magical oaths was something he’d been drilling into Alex’s head since their first lessons together after the boy’s first year and he was glad to see they’d made an impression enough that he took care even with someone he trusted.

“Okay,” Alex said at last, looking up at Alioth with a shy smile.

Alioth returned the smile with a small one of his own for a moment before getting down to business as they were really going to be quite late to breakfast by now. It was Sunday though, so it wasn’t any great calamity. “Very well. Where on your body do you want the mark to reside. Keep in mind that it will be there for the rest of your life.”

The boy nodded and frowned thoughtfully for a long moment before deciding, “My chest, I think.” He pointed to the upper left side of his chest. “So it’s not easy to see, but I can still see it if I want.”

“Sounds good,” Alioth offered, wondering if it was significant that Alex wanted it over his heart or just happenstance. He instructed Alex to open his shirt so that the spot was bare, taking the moment to draw his wand and mentally center himself for some really complex spellcasting.

Though the oaths would obviously be spoken in English, he cast the spell in parseltongue. It would add another significant layer of complication to anyone attempting to modify the spell later. His command of the language was what had made it relatively easy for him to modify Severus’ Mark, but parselmouths were rare, so it was definitely a precaution worth taking.

Alex looked at him curiously in response to the hissing, but said nothing. He took his time on the spell and was careful to make it painless, though it doubtlessly felt strange by the way the boy’s face twisted as the black lines of the Mark began to swirl through his skin, searching for their form. Once the first part of the spell was completed, Alioth gave his oath.

“I, Alioth Black, do give my solemn oath upon this Mark of My Soul to protect its bearer to the best of my ability; to guard him against attacks to his body, magic, and soul, and to preserve his life so long as he so wishes; to respect his wishes and to never use this bond to enforce my will upon him.”

He then continued the spell, the black lines writhing and perhaps becoming a touch painful because Alex’s face contorted a little. When the second portion was completed, he nodded to Alex, who looked back at the parchment to read his oath.

“I, Alex Jones, do give my solemn oath upon this Soul Mark to never knowingly or deliberately bring harm to its creator or any who wear his Mark; to respect his wishes and never use this bond to enforce my will upon him.”

With a small smile, Alioth completed the spell, taking great care to ensure Alex felt no more than perhaps a pinch as the Mark at last settled into a perfect rendering of the symbol of the Master of Death, which was pretty much what Alioth had expected. As the spell settled, Alioth felt the small tug on his soul and a new awareness bloomed in his mind, telling him that Alex was well and right next to him.

Alex had his head tilted straight down to stare at the Mark. “That’s wicked,” he breathed. “It feels like you!”
Alioth chuckled quietly, finally getting Alex to look up at him. His face looked as awed as his voice had sounded. “It feels like my magic. It should feel like that most of the time. Occasionally, you might be able to tell if I hit an emotional extreme, but that’s all.”

It was a relief to Alioth, both to have the extra security for Alex and from him as well. Alioth had done a lot for the boy over the years and he honestly didn’t think Alex would ever betray him, but he knew that there were no absolutes in life. Alex was as liable to betray him as Hermione had ever been. It was a comfort to know that if he and Alex ever did have a falling out, Alex couldn’t ever use the things Alioth had taught him to harm him or Severus. And he suspected that he’d Mark more people eventually, even if only his children.

When Alioth gave his heart, he gave it entirely. He’d always been that way, but experience had taught him to be wary of who he let himself grow so close to. For a long time, there had been only Severus – most of which time the man had been dead – and now, somehow, Alex had joined that select group. Alioth had no doubt whatsoever that, when he did have children, their affection for them would be boundless and his grief and rage should they lose their lives prematurely would be Earth shattering – hopefully not literally. It was, perhaps, fitting that he would use a bastardized version of the very spell that had cost Severus his life the first time in order to protect those he loved this time.

Halloween, as expected, brought Sirius Black trying to break into the Gryffindor common room by assaulting a painting. The fallout of that was, unfortunately, a night spent on the floor of the Great Hall surrounded by hundreds of other people. Needless to say, he didn’t sleep at all that night. Not that it was a terrible hardship given that he didn’t get properly tired, but the fact that he was surrounded by hundreds of people – including patrolling teachers – meant that he couldn’t actually do anything to entertain himself, which was exceedingly boring.

He ended up spending the night challenging himself to mentally design a spell to walk on water – there almost certainly was one in existence already, but he didn’t know it – and then to increase the complexity and diversity of the spell repeatedly until morning, at which point he quickly transferred his efforts into a journal before he misplaced any of the details in his mind. Occlumency vastly improved memory retention, but without careful and constant maintenance, it didn’t mean that things didn’t sometimes get lost.

It was the following day, after potions class, that Severus kept Alioth behind.

“How has Sirius Black been officially disowned?” he asked rather bluntly as soon as the room was secured.

Alioth’s brow rose, intrigued that Severus was asking him outright. It was a show of trust that he didn’t feel the need to obfuscate the question or manipulate him toward an answer. It wasn’t the first time Severus had been so blunt with him and it filled him with warmth to think of how much progress he was obviously making with the man. “No,” he admitted. “His mother would have loved it, I’m certain, but the family was dwindling too fast for my father to disown him for being ‘a stupid teenager with poor taste in friends’ – that’s a quote,” he smirked.

“Then you could find him, could you not?” Severus pressed intently. “I know that most pureblood families have spells to locate their direct kin, even if not entirely legal ones.”

Alioth tipped his head noncommittally. “Sirius is still in danger of being disowned, but he’s not yet done anything bad enough for my father to want him to lose his soul. He’s also not in near enough favor for us to want to aid him, so finding him hasn’t seemed prudent.”

Severus’ jaw tightened, “I had thought you fond of Potter, but perhaps I was mistaken as you seem
to have very little care for his continued survival.”

Alioth lifted an unimpressed eyebrow at the petty dig. Sometimes, Alioth really suspected that Severus began teaching too young. He didn’t get enough time away from the school to learn how to be a proper adult before going right back to being surrounded by adolescent children all day. Perhaps that explained his periodic childishness, which seemed to come out in force whenever anyone named Potter entered the equation. “Harry is in no danger from Sirius,” he dismissed irritably. “The man is no Death Eater. He’s a self-hating Dark wizard blood traitor. He would never have followed Voldemort, not even out of self-preservation as he never had enough to bother. If anything, I strongly suspect he was and perhaps still is loyal to Dumbledore.”

Severus stared at him in utter disbelief, which equated to a heavy frown and sardonically elevated eyebrow, “Sirius Black was a Death Eater. He was the Potters’ Secret Keeper and is responsible for their deaths. He confessed to it when he arrested. Everyone knows this, Black.”

Alioth sighed, “‘Everyone’ knows a lot of things that bear little resemblance to fact, Professor. Peter Pettigrew was a Marked Death Eater – of that I am certain – but Sirius Black never was.”

“You can prove that?” Severus asked dubiously.

Alioth gave it a moment of thought and then a small shrug. “I could. If I cared enough to bother. Nothing I know of the man suggests that he’d be anything but trouble if he attained his freedom, so I’m not in a hurry to help, no.”

Severus looked marginally conflicted, but not convinced. “It doesn’t make sense,” he objected. “Albus would have seen to it that he was exonerated if he were loyal to him.”

“Would he?” Alioth asked with a doubtful smile. “He helped you, yes, but you served a purpose for him as both a teacher and future spy. Sirius did not.”

“He is Potter’s godfather,” Severus countered. “Had he been free, he’d have taken custody of Potter and perhaps the boy would not have disappeared for three years.”

“Perhaps,” Alioth allowed, “but there is no doubt that he’d have raised Harry to be just as brash and irreverent as himself. The boy would have grown up someone very difficult to lead or temper. That wouldn’t make for a very good selfless hero, now would it?”

Severus didn’t immediately respond to that, his brow furrowing as he considered the argument. “You have an extremely poor estimation of the headmaster,” he said at last. “I have heard you insinuate, if not outright accuse him of wrongdoing consistently over the years. Virtually every time something malign occurs.”

Alioth grimaced faintly, “I hardly suppose it’s been that often. And I swear to you right now by my magic that I have never accused Albus Dumbledore of anything without believing I spoke the truth.” He paused a moment to illustrate that his magic was not taking him to task for swearing falsely. “The argument implied in your statement precludes the possibility that Dumbledore is truly not a good man. I honestly believe that he sees himself as such, which is what makes it so easy for him to convince others, but his actions are not those of a good man. Good men do not harm children to see their ends achieved if every other possible avenue has not been exhausted. Good men don’t trick those loyal to them into dying for their cause. Good men don’t attempt to murder their students when they prove themselves inconvenient. Albus Dumbledore believes his actions justified as they are in the name of the Greater Good, but some of our world’s most horrific atrocities have been committed beneath such a banner. Voldemort, Grindelwald, even Hitler began their wars in the name of bettering the world in the image
they perceived as right.”

Alioth sighed on realizing he’d perhaps pushed his point a bit harder than necessary. “I won’t try to tell you what you should believe, Professor. I am merely trying to remove your blinders. They are the same worn by the vast majority of wizarding Britain. Albus Dumbledore is not the definition of Light and Good. Sirius Black never followed Voldemort. And, while we’re at it, Voldemort was never evil. He was insane. He committed many evil acts in the throes of that insanity, yes, but he’s not insane now.”

Severus was watching him with a blank face that Alioth suspected was hiding thoughtfulness, though perhaps he was giving himself too much credit. Perhaps Severus was concealing pity at Alioth’s perceived naivety or even annoyance at his wordiness.

For once, Alioth didn’t feel up to trying to figure it out. He left without another word and Severus did not try to stop him. Alioth was left wondering if he’d just furthered his cause or set himself back a year.

A week after Halloween was the first Quidditch match of the season and also the only game Alioth had lost at Hogwarts thanks to a swarm of dementors. Alex didn’t play Quidditch because he was only moderately good on a broom and his interest in the sport seemed to be limited to appeasing Ron’s obsession. Of course, just because he hadn’t been flying didn’t mean he hadn’t been in danger. Alioth had attended the game just in case Alex needed him but it hadn’t proven necessary. The dementors had crashed the game, but they’d gone after the people on brooms primarily and the collection of professors present had scared them off quickly enough that no one had suffered any serious harm. Alioth had watched from across the stands as Alex had cast a shield patronus around himself and his friends. The boy had successfully cast a fully corporeal patronus in their lessons – a giant snake, interestingly enough – but he knew it was much more difficult to summon those happy memories when the dementors were drawing all the bad ones to the surface. They’d have to keep practicing, perhaps with a despair spell in place to simulate a dementor’s effect. It wasn’t pleasant, but obviously it was necessary. A shield like that wouldn’t do much against a few dozen dementors – not that Alioth was planning on letting that come to pass again, but one never knew.

After the match, they had little time before dinner. Most of the students used the time to return to their dorms for dry clothes. Personally, Alioth hadn’t gotten wet, so he didn’t need to bother. The standard umbrella charm worked rather like a muggle umbrella, guarding one from water coming from directly above. Alioth had altered it so that it was more of a bubble surrounding him into which neither water nor wind above a certain speed could enter. The students on either side of him had attempted to take advantage of his dry little bubble until he’d given them each an icy glare and was rewarded with his returned space.

Thusly, he was one of the first Slytherins – or students in general – seated for dinner. He wasn’t expecting any packages and Arcturus very rarely sent him anything that they hadn’t discussed beforehand, so Alioth was both curious and wary at the arrival of an owl carrying a small parcel. The bird placed it directly in front of him and took flight before he could get a good look at it, though it was a common barn owl, so it had little in the way of distinguishing features.

He eyed the parcel suspiciously. His name was printed on it in the perfectly uniform lettering of a standard dictation quill available at any stationery store in Wizarding Britain. He glanced around, but no one was paying him undue attention. Indeed, there were yet few people present. Severus was at the head table next to Flitwick and Babbling was seated further down. Of the students there were perhaps half a dozen per table with a slow but steady stream beginning to file in, bringing
with them rising noise levels.

With a curious frown, Alioth carefully peeled away the parchment wrapping a small, plain wooden box. He flipped back the top to reveal a piece of tacky costume jewelry in the shape of a heart. Silver encrusted with clear glass cut to look like diamonds. There was a slip of pink paper in the box with it and the scent of a feminine perfume.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Alioth didn’t bother to read the note, just dropping the pendant back into the box and shoving it away, already turning his attention to his food and dismissing the parcel from his mind. He’d only just begun to eat when a sudden commotion from the student directly to his left drew his attention. The student, Hamilton Burke, a boy from his year, had collapsed to the floor and was convulsing rather violently.

Alioth frowned at the sight. He’d always rather liked the boy. He was reasonably quiet and tolerably intelligent and he’d never tried to annoy Alioth about befriending Alex, all points in favor of a tolerable child, in Alioth’s mind. It only took him a pair of seconds to realize that Burke had been sitting right in front of the box containing the unwanted “gift”. Had he touched it? Was it cursed, or perhaps poisoned in a manner that hadn’t affected him due to his nature?

Alioth’s eyes trailed up to the head table, which had yet to take notice of the disturbance. Albus wasn’t looking his way, but Alioth wondered if he was imagining that the old man was rather deliberately looking elsewhere.

With a mental sigh, Alioth raised his voice to call Madam Pomfrey from the head table, then crouched at Burke’s side. Despite finding the boy rather tolerable, Alioth wasn’t willing to expose himself too much in trying to aid him by casting any advanced diagnostics. It was hardly likely that the few seconds he could save from Poppy’s arrival would be worth it, anyway. Instead, he just did what any level-headed prefect may be expected to do, and he restrained the boy enough to keep him from bashing his head on the floor as his body shook violently.

As expected, Pomfrey was there within moments, casting the charms he’d neglected. It took only a few seconds for her to diagnose “poison” before levitating the boy and setting off at a run toward the infirmary. Severus’ voice rang out before the mediwitch was even out of the Great Hall, instructing all students to return to their dormitories immediately. Flitwick was almost instantly enlisting McGonagall’s assistance in investigating the kitchens. As they left with Albus, Severus called for those nearest the incident to remain behind. He wasted no time in gathering the story. Apparently, Burke hadn’t touched his food, but Roselda Dorn and Tawny Wilkins had both seen him investigating the box.

“It came for me, Professor,” Alioth offered up quickly. “It was just a cheap piece of rather gaudy jewelry. I assumed it was from an admirer. I didn’t even bother to read the note. I had intended to discard it after dinner.”

Severus frowned at him, “Do you often receive trinkets from admirers, Black?”

“No, sir,” Alioth supplied honestly, hoping that he was correctly identifying an undertone of jealousy, though he recognized that it may be wishful thinking. It was unlikely the man was concerned with much besides helping his deathly ill student right then, after all. “Perhaps one or two each year, always anonymous, but I’ve always tried to make it very clear that I have no interest and it has seemed to dissuade most.”

“And is there a reason you may have been spared the effect of the poison?” he pressed.

“I can think of two reasons,” Alioth offered. ”First, I didn’t actually touch the note. Second, my
heir ring is enchanted to protect me from most poisons,” he half-lied. He knew that many heir and lordship rings were so enchanted but he’d never actually investigated if his own had such an ability. A natural immunity to poison had made the question pointless. The spells necessary to enchant an item to protect a wearer against poisons in such a way was incredibly complex. Set against the odds of the average person ever being poisoned, it simply wasn’t worth the effort, which is why the protection was rare in anything but rings such as this, generally worn by wealthy, powerful, and paranoid people. The Black family had all three traits in excess, so it was likely that he was speaking truthfully.

Severus nodded briskly, ”All of you return to the common room directly.” And with no further ado, he levitated the box containing the note and necklace and headed out of the room at a jog.

Dinner was served in the common rooms half an hour later – presumably after the professors had confirmed that the kitchens were poison-free. Word that the poison had come from Alioth’s gift spread quickly and he received a lot of looks and was doubtlessly the subject of much quiet conversation, but he ignored it all, devoting his attention to what he was terming the “Dumbledore Problem”. Somehow, he wasn’t greatly surprised that the old man was so endangering other students in his quest to kill Alioth. Dumbledore had always seemed to rate innocent lives rather low in terms of importance in his schemes.

He didn’t question for a moment that Dumbledore was behind this. He was on decently good terms with Voldemort and no matter how he may have irritated his housemates, he very much doubted that any of them had the gumption for murder and the spine to attack the heir of House Black. Besides, someone trying to poison him so soon after Carrow had been compelled to murder him... It stretched plausibility that the two were unrelated and he was virtually certain no student possessed the legilimency skill to have committed the first.

The question was what to do about the headmaster’s murderous tendencies. Killing him would be ideal, but it would have to be done very carefully. He had no interest in tipping his hand as to his intentions the way the old man had done by failing in his attempt – twice now.

Winter break was a welcome relief after months of watching his back for further assassination attempts from his headmaster. He was still mentally tossing around ideas for ending the old man, but he’d made an executive decision to put all of that aside for the three-week break. More than one mental breakdown in the past had taught him to recognize his own limits and he knew that he was approaching them, so he seized the opportunity to get away from the castle for a few weeks in order to take a mental step back from everything that was stressing him. With both Severus and Alex protected and monitored by his Mark and with Alex having the pendant as both protection and a means of escape, Alioth felt confident in his ability to relax without coming back to catastrophe.

He went to New York for the break. Alex had really liked being there, which had given Alioth the idea to get the boy his own place there. Of course, he wasn’t quite old enough to own a flat just yet, but Alioth intended to buy a place and remodel it for him. They could spend some time there during the summer and, if Alex liked it, he’d give it to him as a seventeenth birthday present when the time came. If he didn’t like it, well the Black family hadn’t had a residence in New York yet, so it wouldn’t hurt to add it to the estate.

And renting it out would prove lucrative in the long run if he decided to do so.

So Alioth got a hotel room and spent the first week with a muggle real estate agent, touring various penthouses for sale in Manhattan. Alex had been very taken with Central Park, so he was intent on finding a place with a view of the park. In the end, he found two places that he liked very much.
The one that he found directly off the park was quite a bit smaller with a rustic, homey feel to it that Alioth found immensely comfortable and he found that he absolutely could not allow anyone else to own it, so he bought it for himself despite not really needing a New York penthouse of his own. The second was half a block from the park but much larger – two levels and four bedrooms with huge windows displaying the breathtaking view of the city and he felt confident that Alex would like it given how much time he’d spent looking out the windows of their hotel room the previous summer.

Once he’d purchased both places – using a falsified muggle I.D. that made him a legal adult in the muggle world – he hired a contractor to remodel Alex’s penthouse. The bones of it and the location was wonderful but the interior had been done in some godawful art deco – or something like that according to the real estate agent – nightmare that hurt his eyes. He also hired a decorator and went through what he was looking to do with the both of them, explaining that he’d be traveling until the end of June and would be largely out of contact, though he gave them both a generous budget and signed the necessary papers allowing them to make certain decisions in his absence and promising to cover the costs even if he didn’t like the end result. They were both from reputable firms, so he wasn’t too worried.

His own penthouse only needed furnishing, which he handled with a weekend shopping in the city’s magical district. Thanks to the wonders of magic, all of his purchases were shrunken down so that he could easily transport them to his new flat and enlarge them where he wanted them, making the entire process so much less painful than it might have been.

He managed to be moved into his new flat less than a week into the break and he found himself unexpectedly enamored with it. He hadn’t really thought about it until he was standing in his furnished flat, but it was the first time in his life he’d ever had a place that was truly his own. He’d lived at the Dursleys, at Hogwarts, at Grimmauld Place, and he’d stayed at the Burrow. He’d then lived at Castle Black both alone and with Arcturus. He’d also stayed in a number of hotels and other Black properties, but he’d never actually had a place that was just his. Something that he bought and designed entirely for himself.

He found himself wondering if Severus might like New York, but he didn’t focus on it too much. He could always buy a flat in Britain if he wanted a place of his own there or he could even build a place just for he and Severus. Perhaps if the flat below this went up for sale though, he would turn it into a potions lab. Definitely something to consider for the future.

At the moment, however, he was home and it felt very good.

Apart from some time each day spent with the contractor or decorator, hashing out details while he was available to do so, Alioth made good on his promise to himself to destress over the holiday. He found a magical tailor that worked with muggle styles and procured himself a new wardrobe of muggle-appropriate clothing that would grow a bit with him as he had a few more growing years yet to age himself. He dined at a different restaurant every night, familiarizing himself with more food than he’d ever bothered to try before. Some were fancy five-star places that required he wear a suit and tie. Others were tiny little hole-in-the-wall joints or even a dive bar that had surprisingly good burgers and chips - or fries as the Americans preferred. He spent some time touring libraries and museums, both muggle and magical – and a couple that were combined, which was interesting given the complex illusion magic that ensured only the magical visitors got the full experience.

He also spent some time perusing the shops, though not too much given the holiday insanity. He waited until after the holiday madness to venture out for much pleasure shopping. He found a rare book seller in the magical marketplace and purchased a few books that he was fairly certain the Black Library did not contain and a few others he wanted for his study in his New York flat. He
also found the absolutely perfect gift for Severus’ birthday. Granted, it was rather exorbitantly priced, but he didn’t really care. His work with the Black properties between renting them out and upgrading the farming and ranching the elves did at others was already bringing in a considerable income, so he was sure Arcturus wouldn’t mind a little extra spending from him. And it wasn’t like he could pass up the literal perfect gift for Severus, even if he was cheating with his knowledge of Severus’ past that he’d gleaned via his association with the man’s future self, but all was fair in love and war, right?

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this chapter did not cooperate at all. But it's finally here and I'm pretty happy with it, a sentiment I hope you all share!

I make no promises for future posting, sadly, but I will say that I've been working on some of my older stuff recently, too, like Language of Snakes and My Brother, the Hero, so I might be updating those relatively soon. I'll also continue work on this story and Well Organized Mind. And hopefully Quelling. Lots of fun in the future, just don't hold your breath. Please.

Anyway, let me know what you thought of Alioth's patronus and Remus' deductions. And there was a good bit of Alioth/Severus interaction in this one. Oh, and, of course, Alex's Mark.
Severus stared at the book-shaped package with something between anticipation and dread pooling in his gut. On one hand, he’d received half a liter of basilisk venom from Alioth for the solstice, a gift that must have easily cost ten to fifteen thousand galleons. On the other, his seventeen-year-old student had sent him a birthday gift.

After another moment of hesitation, Severus carefully peeled away the paper. It was a small book wrapped in a soft brown leather cover without script. The spine was tooled, but also bare of title. The style was old and the preservation charms a faint tingle against his fingers when he concentrated, so he suspected that it was both old and expensive to warrant such preservation. Feeling foolish, he held his breath as he carefully opened the cover. Upon laying eyes on the title page, his fingers spasmed against the book but he managed to arrest the motion before he could risk damaging it – which was undoubtedly overly cautious given the preservation warding.

*The Prince*. By Niccolo Machiavelli. The original Italian, printed in 1532.

Dear Merlin, the boy was insane.

And suspiciously well-informed.

This had been Severus’ favorite book growing up. He still owned an old, dog-eared copy from his childhood as well as a mint condition, leather-bound late edition that he’d purchased as an adult and cast preservation warding himself to keep it in that condition. The title, of course, was what had initially drawn him to the book, but he’d become more than slightly enamored with the philosophy over the years. It was rather cutthroat, yes, but it had seemed to make so much sense compared to the ridiculous, ineffective, and corrupt Ministry. Especially when he’d lost Lily at the end of his fifth year, he’d turned to the wisdom in this book for comfort.

There had been a time when he’d imagined the Dark Lord embodying Machiavelli’s philosophy, and in some ways perhaps he had. Once upon a time. Any lofty goals or high-minded ideals the monster had once supported had long since been lost at this point, buried beneath insanity and a thirst for ever more power and control.

But perhaps that information was now out of date, he realized. If Alioth was correct in believing the Dark Lord’s sanity regained, then perhaps he would once more become the man Severus had believed in. And Alioth always did seem to know what he was talking about.

His focus returned to the book in his hands and he turned the pages gently, looking at the familiar lines in the unfamiliar language. Severus was fluent in only English and Latin, but he did have a superb translation charm that would allow him to read this with ease. The superior charm gave one the understanding of a native speaker, so it wasn’t merely a case of changing the words to English, but imparting an understanding of the syntax and idioms and such used in the language. It made it much more precise than reading someone else’s translation, which may misrepresent some of the finer bits. In all honesty, modifying that spell at the age of sixteen was the reason he’d never bothered learning any more languages. The charm only worked on the written form of the language, mostly because he had little enough cause to bother with translating spoken languages. Perhaps he’d modify it if he ever had occasion to travel much.
“Alioth Black,” Severus muttered aloud as he gazed at the book. Despite his honest attempts to avoid encouraging the boy’s - young man now, admittedly – infatuation with him, it seemed that it persisted. He’d honestly thought that the boy would have found someone more fitting for his attentions by now. He’d claimed to spend all of the previous summer traveling, after all, and he was a very attractive young man. Yet he remained fixated on Severus to the point that Severus was quite certain this second extravagant gift in scarcely more than a fortnight indicated the boy’s intention to properly court him.

Despite himself, Severus felt his face warm. Salazar curse him for a fool, Severus was actually flattered. He’d never considered himself worthy of such an elaborate attempt at wooing – particularly not with such expensive and thoughtful gifts. He’d have been considerably less impressed with gifts of jewels and flowers and fancy dress robes, which were more customary courting gifts. Of course, those were usually given between couples that hardly knew each other. For some unfathomable reason, Alioth Black knew more about him than Severus would have thought possible, even with Arcturus’ apparently impressive information network.

He’d managed to track down Severus’ favorite book, after all.

Part of him thought he was giving too much credit. Any potions master would have swooned for so much basilisk venom, after all. And Alioth doubtlessly knew of his mother’s maiden name and Severus’ affection of books was hardly a state secret. Perhaps it had been only a lucky guess.

The young man seemed to know everything, though. He knew that Severus had been a Death Eater. That he’d avoided Azkaban by claiming to be a spy. He knew of Severus’ friendship with Lily and his enmity with James. He’d managed to guess with alarming accuracy at Severus’ precise feelings for Potter in the boy’s first year and at the reason for it. He seemed to know Albus better than Severus did, despite having no real direct contact with the man to Severus’ knowledge.

Of course, one could not forget the memory of watching Alioth take a Killing Curse without even flinching, much less dying. Severus knew of only one explanation for that. Undead creatures were equally unaffected by the spell. Despite that fact, he was fairly certain that Alioth wasn’t undead. Or, if he was, he was a kind of undead of which Severus had never heard, which would make them exceptionally rare. Despite being pale, Alioth definitely wasn’t a vampire. The amount of glamors it would take to mask all the distinctly vampire characteristics would have left enough of a signature upon Alioth that Severus would have noticed with how much time he’d spent alone with him. And vampires were the form of undead most easily able to pass as alive and they, like many other forms of undead, could not long survive in daylight without powerful enchantments, charms, or potions, any of which Severus was relatively certain he’d have noticed at some point in the last five and a half years.

There was also the fact that the undead did not physically change, much less age. If Alioth was undead, it would have to be a recent condition and Severus knew he’d have noticed the difference.

Which left just one likely possibility in Severus’ mind.

Despite Albus’ reservations, the Mark burned into Severus’ arm strongly suggested that Alioth was the Master of Death. Severus had done a lot of research into it, but no one seemed to have any idea of what the Master of Death actually was. Those few who did make claims that sounded definite had no evidence to back up their assertions, leaving Severus to wholly doubt them. Still, with such a title, it was entirely possible to assume that the being possessing it could be a rare or even unique form of undead or a live being with an unexplainable immunity to the Killing Curse.

It seemed absurd and unlikely, but Severus was at a loss as to a more likely explanation.
Severus carefully closed the book and held it, brushing his fingers over the covers and spine with small, reverent strokes while his mind turned over the enigma that was Alioth Black.

The young man was incredibly intelligent and learned, evidenced by his understanding of very advanced warding and spell creation as well as his near perfection in every single class he’d ever attended. He was brave – perhaps more so than was healthy for him given his intervention with the troll in his fourth year, followed by his confronting the Dark Lord. A confrontation that had culminated in him bargaining with the Dark Lord for ownership of Severus’ slave bond. He still wasn’t entirely clear on why Alioth had done that. Or, more importantly, what he intended to do with that ownership in the future. In nearly two years, he’d done nothing with it beyond taking away the pain and changing the shape. He’d never alluded to his control of it in any manner.

Thinking back on all of his interactions with Alioth over the years, Severus began to grow suspicious.

Alioth’s intelligence and maturity had caught Severus’ attention in the boy’s very first year. By the end of that year, he’d developed something of a rapport with him. He’d already begun to treat him somewhat differently to the rest of his students. He hadn’t really noticed at the time, but even when the boy had been twelve, Severus had already begun seeing him as something more than just another student. He’d stood head and shoulders above his peers in intellect and in personality and temperament.

Alioth had responded well to that little extra respect Severus’ gave him and they’d grown gradually closer over the next few years. At least, that’s how Severus had seen it at the time. He found himself wondering now if he didn’t have it backwards. Perhaps it would be more accurate to postulate that he had responded well to Alioth’s manner.

At the end of his fourth year, Alioth had pushed him hard and treated him like an equal rather than a professor when he’d confronted him about his bullying of Potter. As hard as it was for him to admit it even now, that’s what it had been. Alioth had made him see it. And then at the beginning of his fifth year, he’d confessed to a “crush”. It was most interesting, too, the way he’d done it. He’d shown no embarrassment when confessing it or afterward. He’d immediately temporized his admission by promising that he wouldn’t try to act on it and that he understood how inappropriate it was. He’d even demonstrated an understanding of how uncomfortable it would make Severus, which was very true.

After that confession, Alioth had not changed the way he interacted with Severus at all. He hadn’t seemed surprised or hurt when Severus had taken to avoiding him. He seemed delighted at every opportunity to speak with Severus, but always allowed Severus to initiate such instances, never pushing for anything.

And then this. Gifts. If he followed the traditional courtship pattern, he’d give Severus a gift for each solstice and equinox as well as his birthday and would continue to do so until Severus accepted his suit or he gave it up as a lost cause.

With a mental step back to consider their entire relationship, Severus began to suspect that Alioth had been very slowly and patiently seducing him since his first year.

Though perhaps seduce was not quite the right word. A drawn-out courtship may be more accurate. After all, Alioth was clearly playing for keeps here as the courtship gifts indicated a desire to formally bond, not just have sex or even date.

The entire thing would have seemed impossible with most children. Not many children so young were cunning enough or patient enough to even consider such a strategy, much less stick by it for
so long. Alioth, however, was a different creature entirely. He was the very epitome of Salazar’s ideal Slytherin. He was certainly cunning enough and clever enough. If Alioth had decided in his first year that Severus was what he wanted, Severus could actually see the boy sitting down and drawing up a strategy to get him what he wanted, then sticking to it continuously.

Severus huffed a dry, rusty laugh and ran a hand over his eyes. He’d worried about manipulating the boy and taking advantage of his infatuation. It seemed very much like he was the one in danger in this scenario.

Pure amusement suffused him the more he thought on it and he found himself grinning quite helplessly at the book in his lap. It felt surprisingly good – if foreign – to smile so broadly with genuine humor.

After a few moments, he breathed a cleansing sigh and let his face fall into more natural lines, turning his eyes to the book again.

Severus Snape was being courted by the Heir to the Ancient and Noble House of Black. It certainly wasn’t anything he ever could have imagined.

Despite the fact that Alioth was still his student for another year and a half, he found himself considerably less resistant to the courtship than he might have expected. Alioth had waited until he was a legal adult to begin sending the gifts, which spoke strongly of both his patience and intelligence. Severus could not have borne such a thing with someone underage. He was only dealing with the fact it was his student because Alioth had made no attempts to push anything inappropriate on him. He kept his distance and made no insinuations. He didn’t even really flirt with him unless Severus started it.

He recalled the way Alioth had so casually pointed out his utter lack of interest in his fellow students after Burke had been poisoned. That he received interest from at least a few of his classmates and always responded decisively in the negative. Severus had been distracted at the time by the crisis at hand, but he had noted the way Alioth’s classmates had responded to that part of the discussion. He’d gotten the impression that Alioth had understated how clear he made his lack of interest. Indeed, his own observations supported that entirely. Alioth had no friends and rarely even conversed with any other student apart from Potter except when it was explicitly necessary for coursework. Even then he’d never seen any evidence that the conversation entailed any more than the bare minimum. Alioth had admitted to him that he did not form attachments easily and Severus was coming to understand that he relinquished said attachments with equal or perhaps greater difficulty. Severus had a similar predilection, and as such could not help but find it appealing in a potential... spouse.

How strange it was to consider such a thing after so long resigned to a short and lonely life culminating in a sudden and painful end.

But he wasn’t Marked by the Dark Lord any longer. There was no way he could return to his occupation as a spy. And his new master did not seem likely to do anything to invite his untimely end. Indeed, the fact that Alioth seemed to be supporting a fiction that Severus was his own man was commendable. And the courtship… He seemed intent on winning Severus’ affections despite already owning his person.

Severus knew that he should not find that fact… charming, given his position. But he rather did.

The first month back after winter break had gone very positively as far as Alioth was concerned. Severus seemed to have subtly warmed toward him over the break, which Alioth knew would not
be a response to the gifts by itself, or an attempt to garner more such favor. Severus would never
sell his affection in such a manner. If he did not appreciate the sentiment behind a gift, he would
return it, no matter how valuable. The fact that he’d accepted both of Alioth’s gifts and had been
treating him marginally more companionably since the holiday told Alioth beyond doubt that
Severus had decided to allow the courtship – at least for the moment.

That was very good news. Good news of such magnitude that Alioth had repeatedly caught
himself smiling softly for no good reason each time his mind drifted anywhere in the vicinity of
Severus. Never since Severus’ death had Alioth felt so secure in their having a future together.
That fact had the somewhat alarming ability to make him want to grin and laugh at the slightest
incentive and spend far too much time lost in fluffy daydreams that were a combination of the few
truly happy times he’d had with Severus despite the war they’d been fighting, that lovely image
from the Mirror of Erised, and some of their more positive encounters from this life, as well as his
imagination.

It all culminated in making him horribly distractible, less than typically efficient, and drawing a lot
of strange looks from classmates and professors who were accustomed to seeing him much more
solemn of temperament. The few times he’d noticed Severus catching him in such a moment, the
man had looked both curious and cautiously amused, but Alioth was fine with that.

If was a month after the start of term that Dumbledore once more made a nuisance of himself. It
was a mere two days from Valentine’s and thus the Hogsmeade weekend had turned into a sappy
romantic dating event, but for once, Alioth barely noticed. He was in entirely too good a mood to
drive harshly all these petty and fleeting teenage “relationships” around him. He very well
remembered his brief infatuation with Cho Chang in his own silly teenage days. It had been
superficial and based entirely on what he’d thought he should want and in wanting some kind of
connection. It truly had next to nothing to do with who she was and was so far removed from the
feeling of love that he now understood as to be unfit to grace the same category.

He’d hated Severus once upon a time, which wasn’t entirely unjustified given the man’s treatment
of him had practically demanded it. As he’d grown up, though, and as the war had properly put his
priorities in order, he’d come to respect Severus for all that he did. All that he sacrificed. All that
he was capable of. After leaving Hogwarts for good after his sixth year, his respect for Severus
had grown by leaps and bounds as they’d gotten to know one another on more equal terms with
Harry leading the fight against Voldemort and Severus helping as he was able in between
maintaining his cover as a loyal Death Eater and, of course, running Hogwarts. They’d worked
together a lot over that year and Harry had come to appreciate his wry sense of humor and his
refusal to sugar coat anything for the sake of morale. He’d come to rely on his advice and his
prudence when Ron and Hermione had begun to demonstrate their unwillingness to do what
needed to be done.

Somewhere in the course of that, he and Severus had become aware of a growing physical
attraction and times of war were not times of taking things slow. They’d started sleeping together
on the basis of attraction and respect. The genuine affection and love had developed somewhere in
the midst of that.

Alioth was thus lost in thought when the first curse was thrown.

The shielding spell that he’d been using religiously since Albus’ first attempt on his life alerted
Alioth to the incoming spell in just enough time for him to throw himself into a diving roll. The
powerful disemboweling curse missed him by a breath and he palmed his wand as he rolled back to
his feet, wasting half a second to banish his traveling cloak to free up his movement. His robes –
all of them – had been subtly adjusted to allow maximum maneuverability while magically staying
out of his way because he was a paranoid bastard.

Not that he didn’t have good reason for said paranoia, as the present situation demonstrated.

He found himself facing a pair of men in black battle robes, their faces masked by the simple expedient of black cloths tied around their heads leaving only their eyes exposed. Their hoods were then drawn up, shading what remained to be seen of their faces.

Alioth recognized them at once as people he’d probably killed before. Though he didn’t actually know who the individuals were, the outfit was unique. They were part of a mercenary company that called themselves the Guild of Assassins. From what Alioth had gathered in his previous time, the Guild had no relation to the historical group and were just a bunch of mercs with inflated egos.

That said, they were also very good at what they did. They’d joined Voldemort last time – likely because he’d offered them a very large sum of money from the vaults of one of his pureblood followers – but Alioth didn’t think they’d picked any sides at this point. He also seriously doubted that this was Voldemort’s doing.

Before he could do more than make that observation, they were attacking again.

Alioth shielded and kept moving as he ran through his options. They were already beginning to attract a small, wary crowd at a bit of distance, his peripherals informed him. Students and civilians - no one that was going to try to step into the fight, though he hoped someone was smart enough to inform the bloody aurors. He didn’t want to give the whole game away, but Albus wasn’t pulling punches this time. These two would bloody well carve him to pieces if he tried to keep his spells strictly NEWT level and below. The most he could do is try to limit his Dark magic to the point he wouldn’t be arrested the moment the aurors showed up. As much as he’d love to brutally slaughter the pair and send a strong message to anyone thinking they could attack him, he knew that he couldn’t risk that just yet. If they died incidentally as he defended himself, that would be okay, but he couldn’t outright attack with intent to kill.

Unfortunately.

With an irritable grimace, Alioth began fighting back, squeezing in offensive spells between defending himself. The opposition was enough to keep the assassins on their toes and focused on something besides killing him. He ventured into the more powerful spells generally only learned by aurors or people on the dueling circuit and wasn’t able to prevent showing a considerable amount of his genuine magical potential when the assassins stepped up their game and began coordinating their attacks in an attempt to overwhelm his shields. Neither assassin was a slouch in the magical strength department and Alioth barely contained a wince when he heard people cry out in alarm as a light-consuming aura began to form in the air around him as his magic began to infect his surroundings.

Bloody hell, Albus was becoming problematic.

Realizing that he wasn’t going to get out of this without showing his true strength, he dropped some of the pretense and started hitting harder, chaining his spells just a little faster.

He sidestepped a severing curse, ducked a blood boiling curse, and spun away from a bone crushing curse only to get nailed by the _expelliarmus_ launched at almost the same moment in what was undoubtedly a planned and coordinated tactic executed by seasoned partners. As he watched his wand fly through the air he heard someone scream out in agony behind him. A wave of fury rose in him as he realized that some idiotic bystander had just taken a curse meant for him because they weren’t bloody smart enough to seek cover, Alioth abruptly lost all patience for waiting for
the worthless bleeding aurors.

With an enraged growl, Alioth dropped into a roll to avoid the stoneheart curse and mind-melting curse sent simultaneously from different angles, the combination clearly meant to kill him now that he was wandless. He hadn’t wanted to display so much of his skill so soon, but neither did he want to publicly “die” right now. Being forced to change his identity at this point would be nearly catastrophic. And having Arcturus produce another mystery heir would be more than a little suspicious. Coming out of his roll, he threw up a hand to erect a wandless shield as he regained his feet. He followed that immediately with a dust cloud spell that obscured their vision and irritated their eyes, using the moment it took them to counter it to wandlessly summon his wand back to him. It slapped into his palm just in time for him to counter a desiccation spell and duck something he didn’t recognize. It felt like necromancy, so there was a decent chance it wouldn’t affect him, but he wasn’t about to take a chance with an unknown spell.

When he got hit by his second expelliarmus while trying to regain his stance after his duck, he realized that he couldn’t keep messing around stalling for time and playing average sixth year student. If the wrong spell hit him next time, he’d be in a lot of trouble. With a snarl of anger, he slashed his empty hand in a gesture that encompassed both assassins and sent a wave of pure magical force that overwhelmed their shields and instantly dropped them both. He could have taken them down with spells, but that would have been telling of his skill. This way, at least, he only revealed his raw power, which was already decently exposed by the aura he was involuntarily projecting. This was something that could be brushed off as a form of accidental magic borne of his desperation.

Both assassins were down and unmoving. He honestly had no idea if it had stopped their hearts, liquified their brains, or just concussed them and he didn’t rightly care at the moment.

He fell to one knee as a wave of lethargy swept through him. He caught himself and blinked hard to refocus his eyes. Merlin it had been a long time since he’d discharged that kind of magical energy in a go. His core was fine, he knew, as he hadn’t even come close to expending it on this fight. The problem was that his body wasn’t used to that much strain in channeling so much magic. He felt like one giant bruise despite the fact that he was actually incapable of physically bruising. Honestly, were he alive, that probably would have been enough strain on his body to put him into a healing coma. He was undoubtedly seriously injured inside and his magic was trying to heal it, which was making him feel tired.

There was a reason that most people used spells for anything big rather than just shoving their magical strength out of their bodies haphazardly. And he’d done it without a wand which magnified the effects further. Still, having taken them down in such a way that people could write it off as accidental magic made it worth it.

A few hours’ rest would probably be enough to set him to rights, but he didn’t have the luxury of indulging in that just then. For now, he focused his magic into strengthening his damaged body artificially instead of properly healing it. It would probably only make things worse in the long run, but he wasn’t about to lie down and take a nap here, and he wasn’t going to risk anyone thinking he needed a trip to the infirmary, so he’d have to deal with it.

Naturally, that’s when the aurors showed up.

He lifted his head at the sound of the apparation cracks to find wands pointed both at the fallen assassins and at himself. He became aware then, that the aura was still hovering around him. He sighed minutely and concentrated to pull back into him the magic that still wanted to flare in warning at everyone around him. Gradually, the shadow his magic had been casting around him
receded and he was confident that he once again appeared nothing more than a very tired seventeen-year-old school boy.

The aurors must have agreed because their wands lowered and their stances relaxed. One of the aurors that had been checking on the assassins called out for a medic, which probably meant they were alive, and the other rather loudly announced that they were Assassins, causing gasps to ripple through the audience.

That reminded Alioth of the injured bystander and he turned to see Madam Pomfrey already tending to what looked like a fifth year Hufflepuff that Alioth didn’t recognize. By the look of her leg, Alioth supposed she’d caught the bone crusher and was lucky enough it hit her leg and not her chest or head, which could both be acutely fatal.

Somehow, he wasn’t surprised that the Hogwarts mediwitch had a better response time than trained aurors who were meant to be sitting around waiting for such calls.

Things progressed pretty quickly from there. The healers arrived and portkeyed out with their patients and a pair of aurors to guard them. Madam Pomfrey rushed her patient back to the school. The remaining aurors set about questioning witnesses while Alioth was portkeyed to a rather well-appointed little conference room at the Ministry once he’d declined to see any healers.

They left him alone in the room with a pot of tea and a tray of biscuits. Knowing that they’d probably leave him where he was until they’d gathered initial witness statements and everything they could quickly find about him, he made himself comfortable in the chair and closed his eyes to meditate and hasten the recovery of his damaged body.

What felt to him like a short time later, the door opening drew him from his meditation and he opened his eyes to view two unfamiliar aurors entering the room with Amelia Bones.

His brow rose slightly, having not expected the Head of the DMLE to personally question him. He supposed that they’d identified him as heir to one of the wealthiest families in the country and decided that a personal touch was needed. Since he trusted Madam Bones as much as anyone at the Ministry and didn’t recognize either of the aurors as Dumbledore’s pawns, Alioth decided that he wouldn’t bother insisting that his father be present for the questioning. He was of age, but any member of a noble house could actually request their Lord be present for any legal proceeding – not that every Lord would bother for every member. As long as they were content to treat him as the victim, he was rather inclined to act it and fully cooperate. Not that such was false in this case, but he knew there were some aurors who would happily try to twist this into somehow being his fault just because his surname was Black.

“Heir Black,” Amelia greeted politely as she took a seat across from him while the aurors took up positions behind her flanking the door. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

Alioth inclined his head slightly, “Madam Bones,” he returned in kind. “I understand these things take time.”

He got a hint of a smile for that comment and then she opened a scroll of parchment in front of her, placing a pair of small, tooled paperweights at the corners to hold it. “I’m going to start with some routine questions. You’re perfectly within your rights to have your father or a barrister here with you while I do.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary at this time,” Alioth dismissed.

“Very well, then. Can you tell me your full name and date of birth for the record?”
“Alioth Arcturus Black. September 21st, 1976.”

“Thank you. Now, can you tell me why you were going to Hogsmeade today?”

“Just looking to get out of the castle, really,” Alioth said with a small shrug. “I was planning to peruse the bookshop, stop by Honeydukes, maybe grab lunch if I could find a place that wasn’t too crowded...”

She nodded, “Did you tell anyone of your intention to go to Hogsmeade?”

Alioth patiently sat through the tedious process of building the timeline of events, naming additional witnesses, and explaining all that had happened from his point of view. Eventually, she inquired, “Do you have any idea why you were attacked today, Heir Black?”

“I suspect someone is trying to kill me,” Alioth said with a touch of self-deprecation. “As heir of the Black family there could be any number of reasons someone might want me dead. One of my father’s political rivals. Someone hoping they might gain the heirship if I were out of the way. Someone convinced I’m evil because I’m a Black. Could be someone trying to get to Harry Potter through me as it’s fairly well known that he and I are friends.”

Fairly well-known perhaps, but it seemed that Madam Bones hadn’t known because her eyebrows shot up at that. “I wasn’t aware that you were friends with the Potter heir,” she noted. “He’s quite a bit younger than you, isn’t he?”

“Three years,” Alioth confirmed. “He had a bit of trouble in his first year, what with Voldemort possessing the Defense professor and facing a troll and all. I helped him out when I could and sort of took him under my wing.”

Alioth very carefully did not let on his utter glee when he saw Madam Bones tense in response to his casual mention of Quirrell and the troll.

“Voldemort was possessing a professor?” she asked, her tone hard as she said the name without the slightest stumble, significantly increasing Alioth’s estimation of her.

He nodded innocently and went on to recount every danger Alex and anyone else had faced at Hogwarts in the last three years since “Harry” had started there, from the Cerberus to the troll to Voldemort himself and the dementors on the train and at the Quidditch match. By the time he was done, Bones was fuming. He suspected that she was sharp enough to at least suspect that he was using this opportunity to get this information out, he also knew that she would properly investigate everything and find that he hadn’t exaggerated in the slightest.

In the end, Madam Bones advised him that the DMLE would be in contact with regard to his attack and his allegations against the safety of Hogwarts’ students if they had more questions or needed him to testify. “Until the investigation is complete, I would highly advise that you avoid leaving Hogwarts unless it is to go directly home or with a trained bodyguard of some kind,” she said very seriously as they were getting up to leave.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” he offered noncommittally.

Madam Bones just gave a small sigh and looked not at all surprised at him. “What you did today was extremely impressive, Heir Black,” she admitted, “but overconfidence can as easily be your downfall as ignorance.”

Alioth smiled a bit at her genuine concern, “Thank you, Madam, but that is a point of which I am
well aware.” He hesitated briefly, as though uncertain, then questioned, “Those two assassins... will they live?”

Bones softened a bit, very likely assuming that he was worried for having killed people – something anyone would expect of a seventeen-year-old. “It was touch and go for a bit,” she admitted, “but the healers believe that they’ll both live. It’s not entirely certain if they’ll make a full recovery.”

Alioth nodded thoughtfully, wondering how badly he’d scrambled their brains and if they’d spend the rest of their days in the Janus Thickey Ward or just end up a little touched in the head. Then he dismissed the thoughts because he honestly didn’t care. It was good that they’d live though. Word of the duel was going to get around and be bad enough without adding the fact he’d killed two people.

Upon leaving the room, they were immediately confronted with a genially smiling old man in gaudy puce and goldenrod colored robes. “Amelia,” the old coot greeted Bones with a kindly twinkle in his eyes.

She frowned at him and shook her head a little. “Headmaster. I leave Heir Black in your care.”

“Thank you, my dear. I’m certain you’ve taken very good care of him,” Albus said warmly, completely ignoring the lack of warmth in return.

Amelia said nothing more before leading her two bodyguards away.

Albus immediately turned his eyes on Alioth. “Mr. Black. They told me that you were well, but I am heartened to see it with my own eyes. How are you feeling?”

“Tired, Headmaster,” Alioth replied, firmly resisting the almost overwhelming urge to quip something snide that would at least make the old man wonder if Alioth knew. No, Alioth had responded today in a manner much safer and ultimately more satisfying. Madam Bones was about to launch an investigation into Hogwarts and Headmaster Dumbledore with regard to both the safety of the school and their failure to inform the DMLE of important safety concerns and legal issues. That investigation would hopefully keep Albus occupied enough that he wouldn’t have time to sit around plotting the murder of his students and Alioth knew it would trouble the old man greatly to be publicly accused of wrongdoing.

So, he ducked his head, played up his very real exhaustion, and followed the old man back to the Atrium. Dumbledore rattled on about how appalled he was that something like this could happen to one of his students and how he was going to do everything in his power to see the perpetrator was apprehended and how glad he was that Alioth hadn’t been harmed and no one had been seriously hurt. Alioth made appropriate noises of agreement as necessary and generally let the words wash over him.

In the atrium, Albus gave Alioth the password to his floo – lemon sherbet, which was so generic it made Alioth suspect it was a temporary password that would now immediately be changed – and Alioth preceded the man back to his office.

“Would you like some tea, Mr. Black?” Albus offered when he stepped into his office after Alioth.

“No, thank you, Headmaster,” Alioth declined with a tired smile. “I’m really very tired. I think I’m just going to go to bed.”

“Very well,” the old man said wisely. “It may not be a bad idea to stop by the hospital wing.
Madam Pomfrey could make sure you’re okay and give you a dreamless sleep draught,” he suggested.

“I’m fine, Professor,” Alioth assured, trying to look touched by the concern rather than suspicious of it. “I just need some rest and I’ll sleep better in my own bed.”

“Of course, of course,” Albus allowed. “Rest well, Mr. Black.”

Alioth sighed heavily once he was outside the office and did his best not to slouch all the way back to the dungeons. He really, truly was very exhausted.

Happily, he didn’t encounter Alex or Severus on the way down, as they were the only two who could have persuaded him to stop for a chat. As much as he always loved to see Severus, he really was too tired to manage just now. He wasn’t using his magic to force himself to keep going anymore and the depth of his exhaustion almost shocked him. Perhaps it was a result of how many years it had been since he’d felt proper exhaustion on a regular basis but he was finding himself quite in need of a bed.

Grateful that the upper year Slytherins had private rooms, Alioth closed himself inside and collapsed on his bed fully clothed. He had a vague thought to take off his shoes but sleep claimed him before he could actually move to do it.

He woke an unknown amount of time later with a small moan of contentment and immediately turned toward the warmth that his magic had instantly identified as Severus. With a happy smile, he wrapped an arm around the man’s waist where he was sitting at the edge of the bed and curled into him, burying his nose in the man’s hip and inhaling his unique scent. “Mmn, Severus,” he purred blissfully a second and a half before awareness caught up with him and pointed out everything wrong with this picture.

Cautiously, he loosened his hold and rolled back enough to blink up at the man that was most definitely Severus sitting on the side of his bed. There was a hint of pink dusting his cheekbones and he looked incredibly uncomfortable.

Clearing his throat nervously, Alioth drew further away from the man who was still his professor and had not yet given Alioth leave to touch him at all, much less intimately. “Forgive me, sir,” he said, wiping sleep from his eyes. His body ached to reach for the man again, but he ruthlessly repressed the urge. He wouldn’t ruin everything by scaring the man away now when he was so close.

Severus’ Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed and Alioth couldn’t help but follow it with his eyes before he looked up again and was certain he’d been caught. Knowing that he needed to distance himself a bit from too-pleasant old memories, he forced himself to sit up and meet Severus’ eyes evenly. “Was there something you needed, professor?”

The title seemed to galvanize Severus and he drew himself up a bit before responding. “I came to see if you were well. You didn’t respond when I knocked.”

Alioth heaved a heavy sigh. “I was… rather exhausted,” he admitted.

“Yes, that seems evident by the fact you’ve been sleeping nearly twenty hours,” Severus stated wryly.

Alioth blinked in shock and reflexively cast a tempus with a twitch of his fingers. It was indeed lunchtime on Monday. Huh. With his not needing to properly sleep, Alioth was accustomed to
nothing more than dozing since he’d died. It was satisfying – like having a lie in hours after you were sufficiently rested – but not the sort of thing to make him lose time like that or sleep too deeply to hear a knock. “I… didn’t realize I was quite so tired. I’ll just have a shower and head to class, I suppose.”

“You will do nothing of the sort, Mr. Black,” Severus chastised at once, causing Alioth to sink back onto the bed halfway through standing. “You will have a meal here as soon as you’re ready and spend the rest of the day recovering. If the rumors are to be believed, you were generating a visible aura yesterday.” He paused a moment, then continued when Alioth didn’t refute that. “Channeling that much magic would have most people in bed for days if they were capable of it at all. You will rest at least until tomorrow and take that as well if you wish.”

Alioth huffed a small laugh and graced his professor with half a smile. Perhaps it should have rankled to be coddled even so mildly and likely it would have from anyone else. At the moment, he only felt cared for. And maybe he’d have done that for any of his students in a similar situation, but Alioth rather doubted the man would be sitting on the bed next to just anyone. “Thank you, Professor,” he settled on saying. “I’m quite resilient, so I have no doubt I’ll be ready to return to classes tomorrow.”

Severus gave a terse nod and rose, staring at Alioth a moment more than probably necessary, then swept swiftly from the room.

Alioth watched after him with a by-now familiar ache in his gut that he’d long since come to know as longing. It had been eighteen years since his Severus had died. He could wait a couple more, he reminded himself. Things were definitely going in the proper direction.

The weeks after the attack passed with little to remark them. Dumbledore made no more attempts on his life. At least, not that he noticed. Hamilton Burke, the boy who’d fallen prey to Dumbledore's attempted poisoning was finally out of St. Mungo’s, though gossip circulated by the boy’s friends indicated that he’d be receiving weekly treatments to manage the incurable damage to his nervous system. Barring a significant medical breakthrough, he’d never return to school or lead a normal life.

And Dumbledore had meant that for him when his crime was only to care about “Harry” and try to make his life better. The old man was willing to destroy the lives of his students – murder them, even – just so he could cling to his plan to destroy Voldemort via the prophecy. And given that Dumbledore knew damn well that Alex wasn’t the prophecy child meant that the man didn’t even actually believe in it despite using it to his gain.

Dumbledore truly was a monster, no matter how he chose to justify his actions in his own mind.

The Hufflepuff student injured in the last attack had had her bones vanished and regrown and made a full recovery already, but it could have been much worse. If that curse had hit her torso or head, she could very easily have died or at least suffered permanent damage. He’d heard nothing yet about Amelia Bones’ investigation into the headmaster, but he was fairly certain that it existed. For now, he’d just have to be patient.

Onto more important matters, his little blunder with Severus the morning after his attack hadn’t seemed to set him back too much. Severus had seemed a little tenser around him, but not cold or stand-offish, so Alioth wasn’t overly concerned. Severus had no difficulty expressing himself negatively at the smallest inclination, so Alioth was certain he’d know about it if Severus was displeased with him. If anything, he seemed more uncertain or even nervous, perhaps a bit like he’d been right after learning of Alioth’s ”crush” on him.
The end of March brought the vernal equinox followed by the spring school break. The fact that they had to attend classes until after the equinox was an excellent example of the degradation of their culture. What had once been a holiday celebrated throughout the wizarding world was now ignored in favor of the Christian Easter, the exact date of which varied by year. Alioth wasn’t a particularly religious man, but he had practiced the seasonal rituals in the past and found them to be very pleasant and a boon to his magical core. It didn’t increase power, but it did support control of it. In days before wands became common, these rituals had been vital to providing the control necessary to work most spells and the seasonal holidays had provided the impetus for essential magical rituals. Now, they were largely considered silly superstitions or even Dark magic in some cases.

Though he hadn’t celebrated the equinox, he had, of course, given Severus the gift he’d purchased over winter break. Well, the second gift. The first had obviously been *The Prince* which he’d sent off before the break had even ended. This one was a collection of three albums from an American jazz band. Though Alioth suspected that almost no one knew it, Severus had a particular love of smooth jazz and a small collection of vinyl albums to play on his gramophone when he wanted to wind down in the evening. He was relatively sure that Severus didn’t have any albums for this particular band as they were rather new and not widely sold in the U.K. He was confident the man would like the gift and hoped that he appreciated that it was a thoughtful and personal gift.

But he wasn’t letting himself fret about it over the break. He needed the time to destress from Dumbledore and Alex and Severus and school in general. Winter break had worked wonders on him and he meant to make the most of this one as well, even if he only had a couple more months of school to go after the break.

He spent the bulk of the break in New York once again, reveling in his comfortable flat there. It was comfortably sized, but not the cavernous dimensions he’d grown accustomed to as a Black. At around 1,000 square meters, it boasted two sizeable bedrooms, a small library, comfortably sized study on the main floor and a smaller one upstairs with the second bedroom suite, eat-in kitchen and a large living room. There had been a small dining room as well but he’d foreseen no need for it in addition to the table in the kitchen, so he’d put bookshelves into the walls and a squishy sofa and turned it into a reading nook. He particularly loved that it had a total of four fireplaces, including one in the master bedroom. Living in the wizarding world had instilled in him a love of fireplaces. None of them were nearly large enough for a floo, but that suited him fine as he preferred the seclusion offered by not being on the network despite the slight inconvenience. A broad terrace surrounded the main level on all three sides, providing a stunning view of Central Park and the surrounding city from the twelfth story penthouse.

The interior was rather Mediterranean with a lot of rough stone, hardwood floors that weren’t polished to gleaming, wood beams across the ceilings, and distressed wood cabinets in the kitchen. The kitchen table was surrounded by a bench on three sides with only one chair at the other. It was beautiful but not in a way that screamed wealth despite the furnishings and appliances he’d bought new over winter holidays.

The decorator had been through while he was at school, completing the place with paintings and other wall décor and window dressing and such that he hadn’t wanted to be bothered with collecting. He was very pleased with the result. She’d listened to what he’d described as wanting the place to feel like and chosen perfectly to complement what he already had. She was definitely worth every penny as his flat now felt much more home-like and lived in. It probably would have taken him years to get the place looking a fraction so nice with the minimal time and effort he’d have been willing to contribute.

With his flat looking so fantastic, he headed to the flat he’d purchased for Alex first thing the next
day and found himself equally pleased. All of the awful furniture had been donated to a list of charitable organizations the decorator had handy. The stark white marble floors had been replaced with warm and friendly wood that complemented similar wood tones on the trim around the windows and doors. He’d left most of the details up to the contractor/decorator team and found himself very happy with the warm, homely feel that had been cultivated despite the towering ceilings and soaring windows. All the windows in the living room had wide, padded bench seats that Alioth could easily picture Alex enjoying at all times of the day and night to view the city he seemed to cherish so much as his first and proper home.

This flat had only one fireplace – in the main living area – but it was literally surrounded by windows that offered a resplendent view from the ninety-fifth floor.

Alioth didn’t like it nearly as much as his own flat, but that was a good thing or he wouldn’t want to give it away. He thought Alex would like it and that was the important part. Rather than leaving it as a six-bedroom flat as it had been originally, Alioth had added an office and a game room. The former would undoubtedly come in handy as Alex gained more responsibilities and the latter would hopefully amuse him. That still left three bedroom suites in addition to the master, which had two full bathrooms and dressing rooms attached to it.

Once he’d assured himself of the suitability of the flats, he completed his contracts with the decorator and contractor, then set about enjoying his holiday.

Rather than remaining entirely in New York this time, he took a couple of portkey trips each week to various shopping districts around the world. He did some recreational shopping on these trips and enjoyed eating out at all manner of exotic restaurants, but he balanced it with some business. The pleasant kind of business. Exploring local fares and learning about tariffs and taxes. He was upgrading Black properties with increased – in some cases entirely new – farming and ranching capabilities. When they were fully operational, they should not only cover any maintenance costs of the properties themselves, but provide a nice income.

The Black family was sinfully wealthy, yes, but he wanted to add to that wealth as Lord of the House, not drain on it. As the family had diminished in recent decades, the income had likewise dwindled. Since the expenditures had fallen off dramatically as well with fewer members, it hadn’t made a significant dent in the bottom line yet, but Alioth fully intended to see the House flourish once more.

He was also giving serious thought to replacing the family motto of “Always Pure” to something more along the lines of “Family First”. Blood purity meant nothing to him in general, but when the family had almost gone extinct in its attempt to maintain and further blood purity, he thought it was fitting that they shook off that old dogma.

While he was in New York, Alioth took the time to visit MACUSA and inquire about the process of gaining a dual citizenship. His initial thought was for Alex, but as he looked into it, he also realized that he might be interested in going through it himself. Assuming, of course, that Severus had nothing against the States.

If Severus didn’t feel very strongly about destroying Voldemort, there was a very good chance that he would end up controlling Wizarding Britain within the next decade. Though Alioth didn’t really think Voldemort would be a terrible ruler, it was likely that any government under him would be fairly totalitarian. Alioth rather thought he’d prefer to have a second citizenship to fall back on if he decided that he didn’t want to live under his rule.

And, of course, if Severus did want Voldemort destroyed, then there was a very good chance that the current, stagnant and corrupt government would remain in power. In which case, Alioth wasn’t
particular enamored with the idea of living there under that rule, where Dark magic was maligned and Dark creatures reviled. MACUSA was much more moderate with regard to magic and downright tolerant of all manner of creatures. It was quite refreshing.

Just in case, Alioth hired a realtor to put in an offer on the condo below his, authorizing her to more than double market value on the place if necessary. The owners had shown no interest in selling, but money was a great motivator and the price he was prepared to offer would buy them a much nicer condo should they desire. If Severus did consent to stay with him here for any length of time, he wanted to be able to offer him the use of a state-of-the-art potions’ laboratory.

And it wasn’t as though Alioth wouldn’t use it as well. He didn’t have Severus’ passion for brewing, but he did have the skill the man had eventually drilled into him and an appreciation for its usefulness. He even dabbled in inventing though he was nowhere near Severus’ skill. He was better at altering existing potions than creating from scratch.

The downtime he spent in New York, Alioth devoted to working on perfecting his summer solstice gift to Severus. This one wasn’t costing him anything, but he suspected that it would be the most cherished of them all. He just hoped the man would take it well.

When it was time to return to school, Alioth could feel his muscles tightening with wariness before he even arrived at King’s Cross. He was not looking forward to dodging more attempts on his life or the collateral damage that may go along with them. Albus was proving himself incredibly troublesome. Unfortunately, he was also annoyingly well-protected. Alioth had begun subtly looking into ways to get to the old man only to discover that he was more paranoid than Alioth had guessed. He purchased his lemon drops in person, so poisoning them would be nearly impossible. His office was protected by Hogwarts’ own slew of wards as well as some of Albus’ addition, and his personal quarters were only accessible through said office. Even the windows were impenetrable. He also wore a collection of personal wards at all times that Alioth had observed him, making it unlikely that he could sneak in any spell or poison while the man was in public.

In hindsight, Alioth supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. With the number of people – powerful people – the old man managed to infuriate, someone would have undoubtedly killed him decades ago if he weren’t so careful. Luckily, Alioth had taken the Slytherin approach to assassination and explored his options at a careful distance rather than tipping his hand with reckless attempts the way Albus had done, so the old man was none the wiser about Alioth’s intent.

Alioth still had no desire to test himself in a duel with the old man, even if he could find a way to do it that wouldn’t land him in Azkaban if he won. He was beginning to give serious thought to offering Voldemort an alliance for the sole purpose of completing their like goal in ending Dumbledore’s reign of hypocrisy.

School went well enough for the final months of the year. There were no more attempts on his life and Alioth had more peace than ever before as there was not a single student in the school – barring Alex himself – who would voluntarily speak with him, much less question him.

Evidently, there had been enough witnesses when he’d fought the assassins for a decently reliable and accurate account of the fight to have spread throughout the school. Between the fact that he’d fought two professional assassins and won and that he was projecting a visible aura, Alioth was getting a lot of fearful looks these days – largely from Hufflepuffs. The Gryffindors, naturally, were forced into false bravado lest anyone think they had a healthy respect for someone that could knock them on their arses in seconds. Thankfully, that bravado had thus far taken the form of boasting but not actually challenging him. The Ravenclaws kept a healthy distance from him and treated him politely if they were forced together in class, but other than some watchful looks, they
projected indifference toward him. The Slytherins had already had a healthy respect of him. That had grown considerably of late with the entire House now either deferring to him or avoiding him entirely. A few had tried the sycophant approach, doubtlessly hoping to curry favor, but he’d put that idea to bed immediately. He neither wanted nor needed someone following him around fetching and carrying and stroking his ego.

Perhaps if he’d had political aspirations, he’d have used it to his advantage, but he had no such thing. His life’s goals amounted to pleasing Severus and doing as he wished without constant consideration for a public image. Yes, being Lord of House Black had certain responsibilities, but Arcturus didn’t really care for the political arena and Alioth found himself likewise disinclined. He would build the family wealth and trade alliances, but nothing short of Severus’ devout wish would get him involved in toady ing from politicians and attending tedious balls and galas.

Alex was the only one who seemed immune to his new, improved reputation. The boy had expressed concern for his health when he’d first seen him after the incident, but once he was assured that Alioth was well, he went back to treating him exactly as he had before. Alioth appreciated that favor perhaps more than was healthy, but he’d already known that he was extremely attached to the boy. The Mark Alex now bore on his chest was testament to that fact.

The degree of his partiality was evinced one day in early June when Alex physically dragged him into an empty room just after breakfast and issued his heartfelt plea that Alioth find a way to save Buckbeak from the execution that was scheduled for that evening.

Which was how he found himself disillusioned, strolling down toward the gamekeeper’s hut while the rest of the school was at dinner. His absence from the hall wouldn’t be remarked due to the fact that he skipped meals relatively often when he was absorbed in something else. Given that he had no need to eat, it was often difficult to rouse himself from his work just to entertain his taste buds for half an hour’s time.

Alioth had known that Alex and his friends were working on trying to help Buckbeak, of course, and he was honestly grateful that Alex had come to him for help instead of putting himself at risk by taking the hippogriff through the forbidden forest while it was crawling with dementors on the night of the full moon. Honestly, when he thought back to some of the stupid shit he’d done as a kid, he was entirely exasperated with himself. Yes, Buckbeak didn’t deserve to die. But risking his and his friends’ lives to save a freaking animal was just astonishingly ridiculous.

He’d formed attachments so pathetically easily back then, even latching onto a hippogriff as though it was a precious friend or familiar rather than one of Hagrid’s many pets.

Personally, at this point, Alioth felt very little concern for helping the animal, but he did care about Alex and he remembered how important this had felt when he’d been that age. So, it was for Alex rather than the animal that Alioth approached the chained animal while Hagrid was at dinner, thus providing his alibi. Luckily, hippogriffs were much easier to handle than basilisks. It took him but a moment to stun the beast, remove the chain holding it, and then use the same spell he’d used on the basilisk to put it in stasis and shrink it down so he could slip it into his pocket. Hippogriffs had no particular magical resistance, so it wasn’t necessary to cover his body in runes as he’d done with Ahsura.

Once the hippogriff was safely in his possession, he returned to the Slytherin common room and made himself visible as everyone returned from dinner. He waited until after curfew to slip out of the castle and apparate back to Castle Black. There, he found the portkey for Black Palm Hall and made the trip. It was the most remote of the Black properties. The perfect place for a hippogriff to live in peace. He’d get used to the temperature and no doubt enjoy the fishing opportunities. And
Alex could visit him over the summer if he wished, to assure himself of the animal’s well-being.

As it was only late morning on the island, Alioth couldn’t quite resist going for a quick swim in the warm ocean waters. And then he took a quick turn through the library to borrow a few books – Hogwarts never had enough advanced content to keep him entertained. Needless to say, it was quite late before he made it back to Hogwarts.

Or perhaps early would be more accurate. He slipped back into the castle with the predawn light behind him and took no precautions beyond a quiet step to conceal himself as it was well after patrols and still significantly before it was reasonable to expect anyone to be up.

So, naturally, he nearly bumped into Severus shortly after entering the castle. Alioth knew that the man suffered occasional insomnia and he’d evidently decided that a walk through the school was just the thing this morning.

Severus’ dark eyes were startled when they met Alioth’s but that quickly melted into exasperation as he made a point of casting a tempus and looking at the time – just shy of four o’clock – then looking at Alioth expectantly.

“Good morning for a stroll, Professor,” Alioth said pleasantly instead of venturing an explanation that would necessarily be a lie.

Severus gave a small, exasperated sigh and shook his head, “Evidently. Detention with me at seven tonight, Black.”

“I look forward to it,” Alioth replied with a smile.

Severus just gave him a mildly disgruntled look and strode away.

Alioth smiled after him. Getting to spend an evening with Severus was a treat, even if they didn’t talk and Alioth had to scrub cauldrons or prepare ingredients or even write lines. Just being in the same room as the other man was a better way to spend an evening than he could manage on his own.

Thus, the next day, after assuring Alex that Buckbeak was fine and enduring a hug of gratitude in return – he was beginning to grow accustomed to Alex’s impulsive hugs – Alioth made his way down to the dungeons for his evening with Severus. The older man met his greeting smile with a disapproving frown and set him to scrubbing a large and very dirty collection of cauldrons.

Alioth set to it with alacrity and soon found himself humming quietly while he worked, just enjoying the peaceful proximity to the man for whom he’d literally defied time itself. He’d yearned for the man for so many years that now that he was here… Now that he’d gotten the man to at least consider his suit… It was truly euphoric.

While he scrubbed each cauldron with meticulous care, he let his mind wander to the fantasies he had been building of the future. Most of them seemed to revolve around the two of them living together at his flat in New York. Sharing space. Spending evenings curled up together in the reading nook with separate books or spit balling ideas for potions or spells. Hours spent in the kitchen preparing the perfect meal so that when Severus returned from a long day of brewing, he would smile and relax and unwind with Alioth over a home-cooked meal. The sound of the door to the potions lab slamming as Severus locked himself in there for a marathon brewing session after they had a fight.

He wanted these things desperately and he knew without doubt that he and Severus could have
them all if his plans came to fruition. And though he loved the flat in New York, these things
could really happen anywhere in the world that Severus desired. The location wasn’t important.

Alioth was startled out of his thoughts when the Bloody Baron sailed through the wall already
speaking, “Professor Snape, one of the Gryffindors has just been attacked by a large black dog on
the grounds.”

“Fuck!” Alioth snapped with feeling before Severus could respond, causing both the professor and
the ghost to look at him in surprise. Alioth rarely swore as he considered it unnecessary and often
detrimental to the point he wanted to make. He did, however, still indulge in times of sudden stress
or acute pain, and this definitely qualified as the former.

“Something you’d like to share, Black?” Severus asked tersely.

Alioth took a breath and considered his options for just a moment. He knew that the dog was
Sirius and that Alex was more than likely following Ron to the Shrieking Shack at that very
moment. He also knew that Sirius wouldn’t hurt Alex but that hardly meant he was safe with a
wanted fugitive in a school surrounded by dementors on the night of the full moon. And that
completely ignored what Pettigrew may be capable of if pressed. Alioth didn’t doubt for a second
that the rat would abduct Alex and drag him back to Voldemort if he thought it would keep him
alive.

“Sirius Black is a black dog animagus,” he admitted.

Severus’ eyes widened and he turned to the ghost, “Where were they?” he demanded at once.

“Beneath the Whomping Willow,” the Baron replied and Severus was running out of the room
almost before he was finished.

Alioth wasted no time in taking up after the man.

Severus glanced over his shoulder and saw him following. It prompted a fierce scowl, but he
didn’t waste his breath on trying to send him back. It was nearly curfew and they didn’t pass
anyone on the way out of the school. In the wane twilight, Alioth followed Severus out to the
homicidal tree and the professor tossed a silent spell at the knot to immobilize the tree without
even breaking stride.

At the base of the tree, they came to the tunnel where the priceless Cloak of Invisibility was lying
discarded on the ground. Alioth scowled angrily at the treatment of the artifact despite the fact he
remembered being equally as careless with it at that age. He’d been such a thoughtless
Gryffindor. Anything could have happened to it. Even only believing it to be a normal cloak, the
fact that it was an heirloom should have been enough for him to treat it with more respect than that.

Deciding that perhaps it was time to reclaim the hallow, Alioth reached out to snatch it, only for it
to explode into a shower of sparks the moment it touched his skin. The sparks flashed in the night
before settling on and sinking into his hand. It wasn’t the first time he’d touched it, so he could
only imagine that touching it with the intent to reclaim it had caused such a result.

Severus was staring at him suspiciously when Alioth looked up. “Return to the school and alert
the headmaster,” the man said after just a beat.

Alioth lifted an eyebrow and shook his head, “I’m sorry, Professor, but I will not.”

Severus visibly seethed, “I recall it was you who said that Sirius Black wasn’t dangerous!” he
pointed out sharply.
“I said he wasn’t guilty,” Alioth corrected. “I said he wasn’t a Death Eater. He’s still spent more than twelve years in Azkaban. His sanity I cannot vouch for. And I’ve no doubt Harry is involved. The boy has come to mean a lot to me, and I cannot stand by while you both are in danger.”

Without wasting any further time arguing, Alioth slipped down into the tunnel, certain that Severus would follow. He cast a faerie light to hover over his head so that he wand was free for casting, and started down the tunnel, hearing Severus behind him moments later.

“I should stun you and leave you here until I return,” the other man was muttering angrily.

Alioth smiled a bit to himself, certain the physically older man would attempt no such thing. Not that he wasn’t capable of doing such if he deemed it for Alioth’s own good, but he knew the man wouldn’t have been muttering about it if he was going to do it. He’d have just cast the spell. The fact that Alioth was wearing the shield ward still meant that the professor wouldn’t have succeeded in his attempt anyway. Perhaps he suspected as much.

He allowed the light to fade as they neared the shack so that their eyes could slowly adjust to lower lighting before it winked out completely as Alioth slowly emerged from the tunnel. The building was covered in thick dust and showed the wear and tear inherent to housing a werewolf for seven years. Having been inside a number of times in the past, Alioth paid little attention to the state of the place as he followed the tracks in the dust up the stairs.

As he approached the door beyond which voices could be heard, Severus drew distractingly close at his back and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder outside the door. Alioth hadn’t intended to charge in without assessing the situation, but he was hardly going to complain about the contact. So, with Severus close enough for Alioth to feel his breath on his neck, they listened to what was happening beyond the slightly open door.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Alex’s angry voice snapped, taut with fear that he was trying to conceal. “You can’t just go around biting people and dragging them away! What’s wrong with you?”

“Harry…” that was the plaintive voice of Sirius Black.

Alioth mentally smirked. He didn’t remember exactly what all had been said when this had happened to him, but he knew that he’d been more cautious than confrontational like Alex was being. The fact that it was succeeding in making Sirius feel guilty was rather humorous, even if Alioth would have to have a talk with the boy about the proper way to deal with your average psychopath because if Sirius really was everything he was believed to be, Alex would probably be writhing under the Cruciatus by now if not simply dead on the floor.

“You don’t understand,” Sirius continued to whine. “It’s…” Then his voice took on a more aggressive pitch, “It was him!” he snarled.

“Scabbers?” Ron’s voice, thin with stress and pain, demanded plaintively. “What’d he do?”

“He was the one who betrayed them, Harry,” Sirius hissed, sounding more than a little insane and not just because he was blaming a rat for the crimes he was believed to have committed.

Alioth wondered at the fact that he’d volunteered to live with this man immediately after this. Just because the man hadn’t betrayed his parents and wasn’t a Death Eater didn’t mean he was stable. Then again, when the alternative was the Dursleys…
Alioth felt a small twinge of guilt at the thought of his mother’s sister and her family, who were quite likely not nearly so vile as Dumbledore had made them to be.

He quickly reminded himself that their deaths could be lain at Dumbledore’s feet and refocused his attention on the room in front of him in time to hear Sirius cast an *accio* at the rat and Ron shouting and the rat squealing.

Severus, apparently, decided that he’d heard enough with the confirmation that Sirius had a wand. He carefully but firmly pushed Alioth aside and stepped forward, pushing open the door with his wand held high directed at Sirius. Before he could make it through a stunning spell, Hermione’s voice piped in with an *expelliarmus* and Alioth rushed forward just as Sirius was casting a stunner at Severus.

Hermione, the little know-it-all bint had clearly believed that she’d figured out the mystery and disarmed Severus in order to protect poor misunderstood Sirius Black. Ron was still clutching a frantic rat. Alex had his wand out and his eyes wide, clearly having no idea of what to do. Sirius was glaring murder at Severus as Alioth neatly deflected the stunning spell into the wall, where it left a faint scorch mark.

“Now, now, now, let’s all calm down,” Alioth admonished as he settled halfway in front of Severus with his wand pointing at Sirius.

Alex immediately relaxed and lowered his wand at the sight of Alioth, but Hermione’s brow puckered in indecision and she kept hers up. Alioth kept part of his attention on it.

“Who are you?” Sirius snarled, likely responding to his Slytherin tie and his obvious defensive stance in front of Severus.

“My name is Alioth,” he answered smoothly, “and I am the Heir of the House you so disdain, cousin.”

Sirius had apparently heard enough because he immediately threw a stunner at Alioth, as though being Heir of House Black was tantamount to admitting he was a Death Eater or something. The man was clearly mentally imbalanced.

Alex screamed, “NO!” when the spell was cast and hit Sirius was an *expelliarmus* as Alioth was blocking the rather weak stunner without difficulty.

Sirius’ wand landed in the corner of the room and there was a protracted moment of silence before Alioth spoke again. “Well, I think perhaps we should all calm down,” he advised. “To begin with, Sirius, I think we’d all like to know why you kidnapped Mr. Weasley.”

Sirius looked a bit startled at the accusation of kidnapping, but then his eyes fell on the rat and went rather feral again. “I wasn’t trying to get him. I was trying to get that damned rat!” he snarled.

“Why?” Alioth pressed, trying to keep the man focused.

“Because he killed them!” Sirius snarled. “It wasn’t me! I was never the Secret Keeper! It was Pettigrew! That lying, spineless, traitorous rat!”

Ron immediately began defending “Scabbers” while Sirius tried to physically charge at him. Alex lifted a kinetic ward, causing him to bounce back and land on his backside.

Alioth flashed Alex a quick, proud smile at his swift use of the spell that Hogwarts didn’t teach,
then focused back on Sirius. “Are you suggesting that the rat is literally Peter Pettigrew?” he probed for the sake of his audience. “An animagus?”

“I’m not ‘suggesting’ it!” Sirius sneered. “That’s what he is!”

“Well, there’s a simple enough way to prove that,” Alioth shrugged and tossed a casual animagus reversal spell at the rat, which promptly swelled into Peter Pettigrew right there on Ron’s lap. That last bit hadn’t been intentional, but was hilarious, nonetheless.

In the following chaos as Ron scrambled away from the filthy, disgusting man now sprawled across him with Hermione and Alex rushing to help and defend him, Severus quickly summoned his wand – wandlessly, which was hot – and Alioth hurried to place his free hand on top of Severus’ wand arm. It wasn’t restraining, of even urging his arm down – merely requesting patience.

Severus spared him a half-second glance while the rest of the room was otherwise occupied with the former rat still. His stony expression didn’t change, but neither did he cast anything and Alioth removed his hand before anyone noticed.

The next ten or fifteen minutes consisted of a déjà vu inducing explanation about how Pettigrew was really responsible for the elder Potters’ deaths and Sirius had been innocently incarcerated without a trial. Interestingly, it was Hermione who first petitioned for Wormtail’s life while Alex just stood by looking conflicted. Then again, given what he’d told Alioth about his desire to see Albus dead, perhaps it wasn’t so surprising that he’d understand the need for revenge.

When it was decided that they’d head back up to the school, Alioth stunned and bound the vile man, “No point giving him the smallest chance to escape,” he pointed out, for good measure adding a minor curse that prevented animagus transformations for a time. “He’s proven himself rather capable in that regard.

Severus collected and retained the wand Sirius was using while Hermione levitated Pettigrew. Severus and Alioth walked at the back of the pack, where they could keep an eye on everyone. Alioth really hoped that Hermione got at least a month’s worth of detentions for disarming Severus, but he suspected that Albus may brush it under the rug or ensure she received only a token slap on the wrist. Being that she’s one of his precious Gryffindors and that she was acting with impulsive bravery, it was unlikely the old man would see anything wrong with her actions.

Alioth strongly suspected that the man had been the worst kind of bully in his own Hogwarts days as he seemed to view others who engaged in such activities with such warmth and understanding. Stupidity – even when others were hurt or nearly so as a result – was not only allowed, but encouraged. As long as it was his Gryffindors.

Well, it appeared that he was feeling bitter tonight. A natural result of witnessing any injustice to Severus, he supposed. A student disarming a teacher under any circumstances, but especially during a dangerous situation should have resulted in at least a consideration of expulsion. Sadly, he was virtually certain that no such consequence awaited Hermione.

As they emerged onto the school grounds once more, Alioth looked around cautiously, but there was no sign of Remus – or any other werewolf. He realized that Severus was watching him as he looked away from the full moon as it appeared from behind the clouds. “Do you know where Professor Lupin is tonight?” he asked quietly, Sirius non-stop rambling at Alex covering the question.

Severus’ brow rose in surprise a moment before he replied, “He took a potion and went to bed
before your detention,” he explained.

Alioth nodded in understanding, marveling at the fact that it was apparently his detention that had sent Severus to deliver the potion sooner, resulting in no werewolf in tonight’s proceedings. Also, no dementors, as they didn’t get anywhere near the borders of the school grounds and the creatures had been banished quite decisively from the grounds since that unfortunately Quidditch match.

Such a small change to make such a magnificent difference.

Alioth still found himself smiling softly to himself as they walked, his mind drifting back to his own third year and Severus putting himself bodily between three stupid Gryffindors and a feral werewolf. He’d been such a little idiot back then to not see that Severus was a truly good man. Not always a pleasant man, especially if your name was Potter or Sirius, but very much a good man even so.

They reached the castle without incident – Pettigrew still unconscious and Sirius still babbling at Alex about James and Lily.

Alioth interrupted the flow to address Alex, who turned to look at him with a guilty expression on his face. He clearly knew Alioth wasn’t happy with him, which was a start. “You and I will talk tomorrow, Harry. We need to have a very long chat about the decisions that you made tonight.”

Alex’s shoulders slumped and his head bowed, the very picture of a recalcitrant youth. “Sorry, Alioth,” he said glumly.

“Don’t you talk to my godson that way!” Sirius snapped suddenly, moving to stand half in front of Alex as if in his defense.

Alioth sighed, “You’ve not seen your godson in twelve years, Sirius, and your first act as godfather was to put him in a room with a desperate Death Eater. You are emaciated and exhausted, your magic barely functional. And you’re going to lecture me for disapproving of his endangering his life instead of seeking assistance? It baffles me that the Potters were stupid enough to name you godfather of an innocent child.”

The second the world “stupid” was out of his mouth, he knew he’d pushed the man too far. His eyes lit with a less than totally sane rage and the man threw himself at Alioth bodily seeing as he no longer had access to a wand.

Rather than attempting to curse him in such close quarters, Alioth used some of his moderate skill with hand-to-hand to rather effortlessly sidestep and duck under a flailing arm, adding a small push to Sirius’ own momentum to send him careening hard into the wall. The combination of the man’s very unfortunate physical health and his blind rage eliminated any challenge he may have otherwise presented as a former auror.

“Enough!” Severus snapped, though he sounded more exasperated than angered. “Mr. Black, you may return to the common room. You, Black, can restrain yourself or be stunned and bound as well.” He was clearly enjoying his ability to boss Sirius around with impunity.

Alioth smiled faintly at Severus and dipped his head respectfully, “Good evening, Professor.” He then took his leave. With Peter bound, Sirius wandless, and Remus safely potioned for the night, Alioth didn’t expect they would need any help getting from the entrance hall to the headmaster’s office. Honestly, Alioth had no desire at all to see Albus tonight, so he’d been planning to excuse himself regardless.
He returned to his dorm, deciding to spend the night reading one of the books he’d borrowed from Black Palm Hall the previous night. Perhaps it would provide adequate distraction from how badly he wanted to curse Hermione for not only the act of disarming Severus but the fact that she’d put him in danger by doing so. Damn girl seriously needed to learn that “intelligent” didn’t mean “always right”.

It was a lesson Albus could have done with learning as well.

When Alioth turned in his completed potion sample of his final potions class of the year, Severus quietly instructed him to remain behind. He cleaned up his station and packed up his supplies at a leisurely pace while the rest of the class began to empty out. He was at the sink scrubbing his knives when the door clicked shut and he felt the gentle hum of the locking and silencing wards settling into place.

A moment of silence passed while Alioth’s back was to his professor before Severus spoke. “It is my understanding that Potter will be spending the summer with his... godfather,” he hesitated briefly before saying “godfather” as though it pained him to use a term that wasn’t in any way degrading. He still managed to sneer it disdainfully enough to make his feelings on the man clear.

Alioth smiled a little to himself, but didn’t comment as Severus continued.

“Black is hardly sane at this point,” he ventured.

Alioth nodded, using a spell to dry the knives before returning to his station to pack them up.

“Professor Lupin will be living with them this summer. I trust he is balanced enough to keep Sirius in check.”

Severus snorted quietly, “And you don’t believe Lupin to be an even greater liability?”

The physically younger man huffed a small laugh, “He’s a werewolf, not a leper. His condition is entirely controllable. So, no. I don’t believe he’s a liability to Harry.”

Severus’ mouth pinched in a moue of distaste. He hesitated a moment before changing the subject, “So you will be without your companion this summer. However will you cope?”

Alioth smiled a little wider at that. “Well, I do hope to see Harry a bit this summer, but I’ve no doubt I’ll be well occupied with the rest of my time. My father plans to pass his title and full control of the family estate on to me immediately following my graduation, so this coming summer will be spent preparing for that.”

The professor’s brow rose sharply at that. “He intends to step down? That is... rather unusual.”

“Given my age, that’s true,” Alioth allowed. “Given his, however, I don’t think it’s too surprising. He is ninety-three years old this year. He’s more than ready to pass the torch, so to speak.”

“I see,” Severus conceded. “Do you feel you will be ready?”

Alioth nodded with confidence. “I’ve trained for it extensively. I started taking on portions of the estate management more than a year ago, though my father has, of course, retained final approval of everything.” He finished packing his things and moved around to lean against the front of his work station, facing Severus who was standing in front of his desk. “I’m looking forward to it, actually. I have a lot of plans for the estate. My father has grown lazy about it over the last couple of decades and has done little more than maintain it, bringing nothing new to it.”
“May I ask what sort of plans?” Severus ventured, appearing interested.  

Alioth worked to moderate his smile, ridiculously thrilled with the fact that Severus seemed genuinely interested in Alioth’s thoughts and plans for his future. Their future if Alioth had anything to say about it. “The Black family has a great many sizeable residential properties,” Alioth explained. “A few generations ago, most of those properties were either residences or frequent retreats of our expansive family. At present, however, most of them are sitting vacant. I’ve been restoring and remodeling the properties for a while now. I’m also converting some of the grounds of many of the properties to include greenhouses, fields, orchards, and pastures. Once I invest in a couple dozen more house-elves, the properties will become, not only self-sufficient, but they should each generate a tidy income every year. That’s only one of my plans, of course. I’m also looking to invest heavily in the international market, both magical and muggle. I’ve got more ideas percolating, but nothing set in stone just yet.”

“It sounds as though you are ready indeed,” Severus nodded, looking impressed. There was a moment of silence before he took a deep breath and pushed himself fully to his feet. “Enjoy your summer, Mr. Black,” he said, his tone warm and fond.

Alioth smiled widely, warmth flooding his still chest. “You, too, Professor.”

Chapter End Notes

With regard to magical America, I'm using MACUSA because it saves me thinking up names for stuff that has little bearing on the story. Despite that, however, I don't know much about MACUSA in canon and I don't plan on trying to follow that. I will be building Magical America however I feel like doing, so bear with me on that.

Also, it's my birthday tomorrow (or today, depending on your time zone), the 16th. So I'm flouting tradition and giving all of you a gift for my birthday. If, however, you would like to give me birthday presents, I will accept them in the form of comments. ;)

Er, nice ones, please.

Anyway, I hope you liked and I'd love to hear your thoughts!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!