

Of a Linear Circle - Part II

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Of a Linear Circle - Part II

by [flamethrower](#)

Summary

In September of 1971, Severus Snape finds a forgotten portrait of the Slytherin family in a dark corner of the Slytherin Common Room. At the time, he has no idea that talking portrait will affect the rest of his life.

By December, Nizar has been free of a portrait's boundaries for a little over a month. Just in time for things to start to get interesting: he is less than impressed by Death Eaters, agrees with Sirius Black that 12 Grimmauld Place should possibly be burned to the ground, and learns a few things he'd really prefer to avoid.

A Prophecy Learned

Tuesday morning dawns, which is immediately confusing, as there are no windows in Severus's quarters. The impression of light is followed by beeswax and a hint of sandalwood. Severus opens his eyes to see Nizar lying next to him; he's pushed the bed pillow aside during the night and is sleeping with his face pressed into the mattress. It's oddly endearing.

Severus glances up at the wall to find the clock that was hung after his first sight of this bedroom in November. Seven minutes until seven o'clock. "Nizar."

"No," Nizar says at once.

"It's almost seven o'clock."

Nizar grabs the discarded pillow and pulls it over his head. "Mornings are stupid."

Severus laughs and prods Nizar's bare shoulder. "Is this why I rarely saw you in your portrait frame before class in the morning?"

"Yes." Nizar releases a muffled sigh. "Breakfast?"

"If I eat nothing before class, I want them all dead by noon."

Severus watches Nizar dress while pulling on his own clothes. It's a swift economy of movement that he finds fascinating—or perhaps he's simply enamored. The knee-length green vest is embroidered with hints of silver and has a full line of silver buttons, but it's not decorated to the same extent as the black one. "You have more of those, too?"

"I do, but one of them isn't mine. It's Salazar's." Nizar pulls the black vest with its large swathes of gold embroidery out of the wardrobe. "He liked this much flare far more than I did. I think he took mine and left this behind."

"A reminder?"

Nizar shakes his head, smiling as he puts the vest away. "We wore the same size clothes. Things sort of wandered back and forth. The only thing we couldn't share were boots; his feet were longer." He glances over as Severus finishes buttoning his shirt. "You could Apparate downstairs and get clean clothes."

"Refreshing Charm," Severus replies, finishing the row of buttons on his sleeve. "Besides, except for a few shirts, everything I own is black. I could wear the same outfit for a month and no one would ever notice."

"The house-elves would expire in offence."

"Possibly," Severus allows as Nizar places a sheathed knife into each of his boots. "Arming yourself against the students?"

“I know you carry a knife, Severus.” Nizar tucks his wand into his sleeve. “It’s habit. Besides, Helga wanted me to use her gift, not treat it like a relic.”

“That does explain the quill’s presence in your office. And the wand?” Severus asks.

Nizar frowns. “I don’t know. It’s an excellent dueling wand, but I don’t need one. I imagine there is someone it’s meant for, but ash is tricky to pass down.”

“Current wandlore states that it’s impossible.”

“No, just insanely difficult.” Nizar opens the bedroom door. “We should probably space this out. I don’t want to give that walking fucking corpse another reason to harm you, and since I’m already known to hate mornings even more than you do...”

“Wait.” Severus brushes his fingers down the side of Nizar’s face, watching in amusement as the man’s eyes flutter in response. “No regrets?”

“Absolutely not,” Nizar replies. “I just don’t handle mornings well.”

“That is why tea exists.” Severus kisses him, which elicits a purr. “I’ll see you in a few minutes,” he says, and Apparates to his quarters before he’s tempted to skip the morning meal. His clothes are fine, but he has a dire need to shave before presenting himself in the Great Hall.

He also needs a few minutes to mentally review last night. He didn’t expect any of his scattered feelings for Nizar to ever be reciprocated beyond friendship. Perhaps they still haven’t been.

No; that would be Severus lying to himself. Last night hadn’t been that simple. He has known simple entanglements and wanted to escape them immediately afterwards.

Severus does not want to escape. He would rather Nizar...stay.

His lips twitch. Hopeless romantics, indeed. He is nothing of the sort.

Nizar doesn’t make it down to breakfast until seven-thirty, where he joins Minerva in scowling displeasure over the early hour. Tea improves both of their outlooks; Nizar does an excellent job of not appearing to be completely distracted. If Severus were not aware of last night, even he would be fooled.

Minerva scoots her chair back to stand up and then pauses mid-motion. “Why, Severus. You look very well today.”

Severus glares at her. “I look no different than I usually do.”

Minerva shakes her head, studying at him in a way that suggests she’s still peering over her old glasses. “You have dressed as usual, you are as well-groomed as ever, and you scowl like a terror, but you look...” She frowns, as if searching for words. “Less beaten, Severus,” she says quietly. “I haven’t seen you appear this well-rested in years.”

“I still have no idea what you mean.” He doesn’t; his face in the mirror was the same as always. He didn’t linger over his reflection, but—

No. Minerva is imagining things, or fishing for gossip that she is *not* getting.

The fourth-year Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs are rambunctious that morning, which causes Severus to strip them of points and hand out detentions that he knows Argus will enjoy overseeing. Then he blisters their ears with the reminder that a classroom full of volatile ingredients, open flame, and bubbling cauldrons is no place to act like imbeciles.

The Gryffindors and Slytherins must have been warned by the fourth-years. They spend most of the class period in a state of quiet, proper behavior that is so rare it makes Severus suspect a plot.

Neville Longbottom approaches Severus’s desk at the end of class without Severus needing to pin him down. “I...I think I have an idea, sir.”

“That is the nature of a hypothesis, yes.” Severus scowls at the Gryffindors remaining behind until they gain wisdom and turn to leave. They’re probably going to wait in the stairwell, once again convinced that Neville Longbottom is in mortal peril.

“Y-yes, sir. I...” Longbottom lowers his head as he hands over the scroll. “Don’t laugh, okay? I mean, it’s you, and you’re...you, and I know you haven’t forgiven me for the boggart—”

“Unbelievable as it may seem, I blame Professor Lupin for the boggart incident *far* more than I blame you.” Severus puts the scroll down on his desk. That damned boggart from Longbottom’s third year keeps coming back to haunt him. He is also not fond of the fact that Nizar’s boggart was himself, no matter that Nizar claims it to be symbolic. “I asked you for a theory. I will read this later; present the basis of it now.”

“O-okay, s-sir.” Longbottom fidgets in place. “It’s—I think it’s my fault. With the plants.”

“Go on,” Severus prompts.

“Well, it’s—Professor Sprout says that plants grow really well around me, better than anyone she’s ever seen. I like plants, even when they’re not alive anymore.” Longbottom sucks in a nervous breath. “I think I’m overpowering the plants in the potions, sir.”

Severus frowns as he interprets that last sentence. “Consciously?” Longbottom wildly shakes his head. “Well, then. What do you propose to do about it, Mister Longbottom?”

Longbottom freezes in place. “Do? I—I guess not brew potions with plants in them anymore, sir.”

Severus narrows his eyes. “And that would serve what purpose, Mister Longbottom?”

“I—not melting cauldrons, sir?”

“Longbottom, if that were my only concern, I would have ejected you from this classroom after your first year and left you to cope with your O.W.L.s this year on your own.” Severus

slides a piece of paper across his desk. “Take it.”

Longbottom picks up the paper as if it’s toxic. Absolute rubbish; the only thing Severus did was saturate it in the fumes from a brewing Calming Draught so that the young man could view it without passing out. “*Potions for the Magical Gardener*,” Longbottom reads, his eyebrows drawing together in perplexity. “What’s this book for, sir?”

Severus glares at him for overlooking the obvious. “That book, the scroll I gave you, and your hypothesis—which is astoundingly correct, by the way, something I didn’t think you capable of—are the answer to your cauldron-melting difficulties. It is now your job to *think*, and to use the resources provided to solve this problem. I will not coddle you and point it out for you any more than I already have.”

Longbottom blinks several times as he folds up the paper and slides it into his bookbag. “Er, uh, y-yes, sir. Th-thank you, sir.”

“Get out,” Severus says in dismissal. “There are first-years coming into this classroom momentarily who do not need to emulate your fumbling example.”

Severus has no idea how he gets through the rest of the morning. The first-years of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are their usual, disastrous selves, which is normal. Severus watches the third-year Slytherins and Gryffindors like a loathsome, vile hawk, waiting for blunders. They come, but never from the direction he might wish. Mister Black of Gryffindor has a deft hand with potions, when he’s not overdoing it and creating noxious clouds. Miss Sibazaki willingly pairs with him to keep their mistakes to a minimum, which earns the pair cross-eyed looks from both of their Houses. Miss Suri and Miss Vane of Gryffindor focus like the fate of the world depends on their potion’s success. Mitcham and Newbourne fail, spectacularly so, to create a bruise paste and instead produce something that might fell a dragon if ingested. Severus can’t decide if he’s impressed or horrified.

It’s the bloody Carrow twins who are giving him trouble, and it makes him want to tear out his hair. He can’t alienate the twits, not with Alecto and Amycus’s placement in the Dark Lord’s inner circle. He can fail them with impunity for not completing their assignment, given that they spend the entire class period loudly gossiping in cruel fashion about every Gryffindor in the room, some that aren’t, and even a few of the Slytherins who *are* present—all those who aren’t Pure-bloods.

If Severus has one consolation in life, it’s that he was never this much of a raging twat about blood purity.

He skips lunch, finding his appetite lacking. Instead, he catches up on paperwork, grading homework and essays straight through until five o’clock. He uses enough red ink to paint a wall, and there is no lack of scathing commentary. However, he is always stridently fair, if brutally so, as he well remembers when Horace Slughorn was not.

He forces himself to put down his quill, clean his hands, and then walks from the dungeons to the Grand Stair, proceeding to the seventh floor and glaring death at every student he encounters. The Defence classroom door is ajar, though the room is empty. Nizar is in his

office, frowning in concentration as he traces something out with ink and quill while seated at his desk. Severus thinks about it for a moment before pushing the classroom door shut.

Nizar's head jerks up at the sound, and then he smiles at Severus. "Good afternoon."

"Is it?" Severus asks, not sure he's convinced.

"Possibly. Come here," Nizar invites him.

Severus walks into Nizar's office, taking a look down at the piece of paper. It's covered in curling lines—

That's all he sees before his vision blurs and he stumbles backwards, catching himself on the doorframe. "What the *hell* is that?"

"Pictish maze magic," Nizar explains, flipping the paper upside down to hide the ink. "I'm starting to remember it, to my relief. I put a lot of time into learning it; I'd hate to have lost it for good."

"Does it always have such an effect on someone?" Severus asks, shaking his head to dispel lingering dizziness.

"It depends on the spell. This was only meant to disorient anyone but the one who crafted it, and is otherwise harmless," Nizar explains. "It's a distraction spell."

"Ingenious. I'm certain your enemies must have been too busy vomiting to be overly concerned with fighting afterwards," Severus says dryly.

"Sometimes." Nizar looks up at him. "What's wrong?"

Severus stares at Nizar, and wonders that it's so easy to say. "This has no bearing on last night, but I...there are too many days when I truly despise myself."

"No," Nizar says at once, surprising him. "Do you despise who you need to be in order to brilliantly deceive those who must be deceived, or do you despise who you are when you're alone with me?"

"Why does it make a difference?" Severus asks, scowling.

"Because any time you've taken pleasure in another's suffering, they've usually done something to deserve it," Nizar points out with a wry smile. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"You're not," he grits out.

Nizar stands up and wraps his arms around Severus. "And that's why it matters."

Severus sighs and hugs a Slytherin idiot. "It isn't that easy."

"Of course not." Nizar steps back and gazes at him. "But if you were truly a vile person, Severus, you'd never once contemplate hating yourself. It wouldn't even occur to you."

Severus nods in stiff acknowledgement. God knows it's never occurred to Voldemort to be displeased with himself.

"This really is about last night, though." Nizar takes Severus's hands. "I thought I was going to be the one to have some sort of mental snap over this."

"You tend to linger over yours. I prefer to suffer all of it at once," Severus says, reassured by the feel of warm fingers interlaced with his own.

"That's accurate," Nizar murmurs. "Severus: you are a kind, vicious Slytherin, and a good man. I do not suffer fools, and neither do you."

"No," Severus admits, "I don't."

"Speaking of fools: I've had time to hide everything breakable in the sitting room. Do you want to view that *Pensieve* memory now?"

Severus desperately wants a distraction from unwanted introspection, but the suspicion he'd felt during his class of fifth-years returns. "I'm not going to like what I see, am I?"

Nizar stands up on his toes and kisses Severus, a swift, dry peck that is still filled with affection. "Probably not." He closes the door to his office, flips the cast-iron *S*, and opens the door to his quarters. The *Pensieve* is resting on the old wooden dining table. Even knowing its purpose, it's still a beautiful use of the red sandstone of the Highlands.

Severus watches as Nizar retrieves his wand; he frowns as he concentrates on the memory he plans to share. "Minerva said something intriguing at breakfast."

"About your looking well-rested?" Nizar pulls forth a bright silver mist of concentrated memory from his temple and lowers it to the *Pensieve*. The bowl catches it, but instead of the wilder swirling Severus is accustomed to seeing, the memory settles into place with perfect stillness. It looks as if a gentle fog rests in the *Pensieve*. "What did you think removing nineteen years of fucking curse damage would do? Nothing?"

Severus glares at him. "I hadn't concerned myself with it beyond enjoying the benefit of not being in pain afterwards."

Nizar glances at him as he puts his wand away. "I do understand why that would be your only concern. *Cruciatu* hurts like hell."

"You've experienced it, then?"

"Yes." Nizar dips his hand into the memory fog, eyes half-closed. "A long time ago. I enjoyed killing that bastard. Here, I've gotten it right. You can view the memory any time you like," he says, withdrawing his hand from the *Pensieve*.

"You're not coming?" Severus asks.

Nizar shakes his head. "This was yesterday for me."

Severus reminds himself that he's already been warned that he won't like the memory. He dunks his head and lets the Pensieve's magic pull him in. The descent is far kinder than Albus's Pensieve, which tends to fling one about.

Seeing Nizar and Albus seated in the Headmaster's office should have been a second warning. He does take the time to note that there is no difference in the visual spectrum for him within the Pensieve, which is a minor disappointment.

By the time he realizes exactly what's going to be said, it's too late to distance himself from what he hears.

He lifts his head when the memory ejects him, staring down at the still layer of mist in the Pensieve. "Nizar. Come and collect this, please."

Severus waits until Nizar has retrieved the memory before he picks up the Pensieve and smashes it against the wall. Then he stands in place, trembling. If he does not master this rage, he's going to murder his employer.

"Almost everything breakable, then." Nizar tilts his head at the pieces of broken Pensieve, appearing remarkably calm. "I needed to be able to put that back."

"Then you can put the *pieces* back!" Severus yells, and then clenches his jaw. Nizar is not the person he's angry with.

"That does answer my question as to whether or not Dumbledore ever told you the whole of the prophecy," Nizar says.

"No. He didn't. I imagine he was aware of what my response would be." Severus digs his fingernails into his palms. "I did not promise to safeguard that child only for Potter to be sent off like a lamb to the slaughterhouse!"

"Well, obviously that plan has changed."

Severus whirls on Nizar, a snarl on his lips that he restrains by the barest margin. "Changed *how*? You stated the outcome of their meeting yourself!"

"Yes, I did, though most of my horror in that moment was grounded in the fact that Albus Dumbledore hadn't thought to try anything *else*." Nizar bends down and picks up one of the broken pieces of Pensieve, giving it a curious look. "I did say that Potter and Voldemort would have to kill each other when speaking to Dumbledore. I didn't say that if Voldemort were to use the Killing Curse on Potter with that Horcrux still in place, Potter might survive it a second time."

Severus draws in a harsh breath and lets it out slowly. "Explain, please."

Nizar puts the first broken bit of Pensieve on the table and picks up another one. "Soul jars—Horcruxes—are living things. It's part of what makes them so fucking dangerous, and so very offensive to those of us who understand their nature. If anyone else were to hit Potter with the

Killing Curse, Potter might die, but the shard would still be alive. We should all hope that never, ever happens. One Voldemort is annoying enough.”

That is a sobering, blood-chilling concept. “And if the Dark Lord were to do so?”

“A Killing Curse cast by Voldemort would be more likely to destroy the soul shard first, not the person, as the two magics would recognize each other.” Nizar adds more pieces of broken Pensieve to the growing pile. “Granted, then Mister Potter had best be able to get the fuck away from Voldemort, or a second hit with the Killing Curse would definitely make him dead.”

“More likely,” Severus repeats. “Not a certainty.”

“No. That’s why Mind Magic is the preferred manner of removing a soul shard. The result has much less chance of causing death.” Nizar rises with the last pieces of the shattered Pensieve in his hands and drops them onto the scarred wooden tabletop. “And I say the plan has changed because I suspect someone else figured out that bit about Voldemort and Potter being pitted against each other.”

“Potter’s removal from his home.” Severus frowns. “I doubt Dumbledore has ever told anyone else about the prophecy.”

“Which makes me wonder why he told me.” Nizar lines up the pieces of the Pensieve. “Granted, if he thinks I’ll find Potter just to give him back a chess piece, he’s out of his fucking mind.”

Severus looks at Nizar in surprise. “You don’t trust Albus.”

“I don’t trust anyone who tries to read my thoughts without permission when I haven’t even known them twelve hours yet.” Nizar gets out his wand and touches the largest piece of red stone. “*Confracta reparabit id.*”

Severus watches the pieces of the Pensieve draw together and mend, but even to his senses it doesn’t feel the same. “I don’t think it worked.”

“Once the magic in a *Pensife* is destroyed, it’s gone forever. I can at least put a repaired bowl back where I found it, though.”

Severus feels an uncomfortable pang of guilt that is as unwanted as the earlier introspection. “I’m sorry. I haven’t gotten you in trouble, have I?”

Nizar picks up the Pensieve and tilts it from side to side, searching for any lingering damage. “I only told them I’d bring the *Pensife* back. I didn’t say it would *work* when I did so.”

Severus smiles at Nizar. “I do adore your way with words.”

“Blame myriad Courts.” Nizar places the Pensieve under his arm and grins. “It’s fun to mock people and have them be entirely unaware of it. I need to put this back, since it’s now useless. Better to do it before the sun sets.”

“Company?” Severus offers.

Nizar nods and holds out his arm. “Excellent. I’ve never gone grave-robbing with someone I’m attempting to court before.”

Severus waits until the Apparition is complete, just within the bounds of an older cemetery. The fencing is made of stone with cast-iron spikes pointing towards the sky. “This isn’t grave-robbing. This is grave-returning.”

“Picky, picky. Next time, I’ll take you with me for the first part.” Nizar turns in a circle while Severus glances at the monuments, which are worn with age or still sharp-edged from remaining hints of old Preservation Charms. Dates are worn, but the earliest he can find on a preserved stone is from the 1400s.

“Where are we?”

“Somewhere north of Aberdeen.” Nizar points at a low hill, which is just as covered in grave monuments as everything else. “That way.”

“How did you know this was here?” Severus asks while Nizar walks around the mound, his eyes following the line of something Severus can’t see.

Nizar gets out his wand and points it at one specific spot, which causes a hole to open in the earth that is as wide and as tall as a man. “This is the barrow of Gedeloc, last magic-worker of the Venicones.”

“How do you know?”

Nizar checks their surroundings before lighting his wand without speaking the word.

“Because I helped put him in here. Always a good idea to go grave-borrowing from someone who’s less likely to curse you from the afterlife.”

“Oh, so now it’s borrowing.” Severus rolls his eyes. “Hurry up and put it back before he changes his mind.”

Severus waits, crossing his arms to keep from any telltale sign of impatience beyond the expression on his face. It’s getting dark, and he has no desire to find out if this cemetery hosts a ghoulish pack. All it takes is an older crypt or a barrow, combined with just the right amount of forgetfulness, and a pack will move in.

He’s wondering if he’ll have to dare a barrow, after all, when Nizar emerges from the hillside once it’s fully dark. “Sorry about the wait. Gedeloc designed his own barrow’s magical maze, and it likes to play tricks.”

Severus holds out his hand to help lift Nizar out of the depression in the ground. The doorway is promptly swallowed by the earth until the hillside looks undisturbed. “How did you know this Gedeloc?”

“I can’t remember.” Nizar brushes cobwebs and dust from his sleeves. “Rowena was right that the Preservation Charm would start to fill in the blanks, but they’re entirely out of order.

Half of it is useless for lack of context, and I still don't know my own birthday. Let's go back to the place we came in. It's never a good idea to Apparate this close to a protected barrow."

"You have cobwebs in your hair," Severus observes when they're back in Nizar's sitting room.

Nizar reaches up and makes a face when his hand encounters the first web. "Just in time for dinner."

"I dare you to go to the Great Hall exactly as you are."

Nizar brushes off the cobweb on his robe front. "You do realize if someone asks me what I've been doing, I'm going to be honest."

Severus smiles. "I was counting on it, actually."

He Apparates down to his locked office and leaves from there, if only to continue this necessary, irritating illusion, and is first to the Great Hall. Nizar has seven flights of stairs to cope with and arrives a few minutes later. The students give Nizar a few curious looks, but apparently they consider cobwebs and dirt to be entirely in character for their new Defence teacher. It's the staff who do not disappoint.

"What on earth have you been *doing*?" Aurora asks in dismay when Nizar sits down.

"And could you not have bothered with a cleansing charm afterwards?" Charity adds, staring at the cobwebs in alarm.

"I was visiting a barrow," Nizar says, which causes Minerva to choke on her tea but not strangle herself on it.

Pomona stares at Nizar. "A—a *barrow*. Why?"

"How else is one to visit the dead unless one goes to where they happen to live?" Nizar asks innocently.

"I don't believe it," Charity says after a moment of narrow-eyed disapproval.

"I'd believe it," Filius murmurs under his breath.

"Not even you would be that rude," Charity continues.

"Rude?" Nizar blinks at her in confusion. "Why is it rude?"

"Tell us what you were really doing," Pomona says, smiling.

"Oh, all right. I was exploring far too many of Hogwarts' abandoned back passages," Nizar replies.

Aurora and Minerva lean in close to Nizar after the biddies go back to clucking their disapproval over the cobwebs. "It was actually a barrow, wasn't it?" Minerva asks.

Nizar smiles at them. “One of these days, the others are going to realize that the truth is far more entertaining than a lie.”

* * * *

Nizar looks up as motion gets his attention and catches the slip of paper that floats down. He unfolds it to find Severus’s delightfully close-set, spidery handwriting: *Can I see you before the madness descends again in the morning?*

He smiles and lifts his quill from the page he’s working on to write a response: *You don’t even have to ask.*

He’s waving ink dry when Severus Apparates into his quarters. “Much like knocking, I’m not going to cease asking anytime soon. What are you doing?”

Nizar looks at the two books in his lap. “Learning Old Welsh in hopes that it helps with the Cumbric interpretation.”

Severus drops down onto the sofa next to him. “You’re teaching yourself a new language while attempting to translate another.”

“They’re closely related, though close is definitely a relative term. Old Welsh is not really the same thing.” Nizar closes both books. “Besides, I don’t exactly assign a lot of homework to grade.”

Severus frowns. “Why not?”

“Because I give them five essays per term. Students have their choice of well-researched subject matter as long as it’s relevant to their year level, uses at least four resources that are not those stupid textbooks, and oh, it has to be sixteen feet.”

Severus stares at him in what is either awe or remembered academic horror. “I’m surprised I’ve not heard them whinging about it in the hallways.”

“The first one is due before the winter holiday begins. I’m expecting the whinging to begin any day now from those foolish enough not to begin last month.” Nizar smiles. “Of course, a quarter of my Ravenclaws, Miss Granger, Miss Parvati Patil, and the Weasley twins are done already. I’m looking forward to reading those on Friday.”

“Fred and George Weasley. Completed an assignment early.”

Nizar nods. “Too many people treat those two as if they’re incompetent, despite their O.W.L. grades—and who named those stupid testing standards, anyway?”

Severus smiles. “I don’t know. I do know they got an O in Potions, or I wouldn’t be putting up with them.”

“Os in *every* subject they took an O.W.L. for, Severus,” Nizar says. “I asked Minerva. Despite that, most of the school, teachers included, treat the twins like they’re blithering idiots. I refuse to do so, which is baffling the hell out of Molly Weasley.”

“You met the Weasleys?” Severus asks.

“Mm. Arthur does a very good job of playing it off like he’s hapless, and it’s always fun to see that type be underestimated.” Nizar puts his work aside so he can slump down against Severus’s shoulder. “Did Molly lose anyone in the last war?”

He can feel Severus tense up at the question before making himself relax. “Yes. Her twin brothers, Fabian and Gideon, among other close relatives. Fred and George’s middle names are Gideon and Fabian.”

“That would be the other part of it, then,” Nizar says. “She’s going to alienate her children if she doesn’t stop letting those old fears guide her decisions when it comes to the twins.”

“I’d noticed similarly. The Prewetts are exceptionally stubborn; the twins will either prove her fears groundless, or there will be yet another Weasley child estranged from that family.”

Nizar winces. “Oh, dear. Who?”

“Their son Percival, two years older than the twins. I’m not aware of all the details, and I don’t want to be, but Percy Weasley has made it clear that he stands with Fudge and the Ministry,” Severus says in a tone of evident disgust.

Nizar sighs. “That poor idiot, and I don’t mean Cornelius Fudge.”

“Please. You would use far more interesting vocabulary if you were to insult Minister Fudge.” Severus pauses. “If you tell Fred and George that they’re my best students in seventh-year Potions...”

“Your secret is safe,” Nizar assures him dryly. “No one would believe it.”

Severus wraps his arm around Nizar’s shoulders. “I could announce it from the bloody towers myself and no one would believe it. Do you have any plans for Friday aside from grading the essays from overenthusiastic academics?”

“Don’t mock them. *You’re* an overenthusiastic academic.” Nizar grins when Severus swears under his breath. “I want to go to London on Friday evening. That device Dumbledore crafted pointed at someone in London, but not to Potter’s blood relations in Surrey. I want to know why.”

“I’d wondered about the lack,” Severus murmurs. “I’ve also been thinking it time to go hunt down that interesting Underground again. They might not have had answers in October, but it’s now December. Things change.”

“That they do. The last time I was in London, it was a foul-smelling medieval fortress,” Nizar says.

“Get close enough to the Thames, and I’m sure it will immediately seem familiar.”

* * * *

Severus awakens Wednesday morning with a start. At least this time he knows he’s in Nizar’s bed, but at first he can’t figure out what roused him. Then his left arm burns with the increased pressure of a Summons from the Dark Lord.

Twice in a week. Severus wonders if Voldemort has a point to this early morning meeting, or if he just likes to remind Severus that he is on a short leash.

As if he could forget.

He doesn’t realize that Nizar is sitting up at his side, awake, until he speaks. “If you die, I won’t be forgiving you anytime soon.”

“My death is not that likely for a random mid-week summons in December,” Severus replies, leaning over to rest his head on Nizar’s shoulder. His bare skin is cold, as if he’s been sitting up for a while. “You didn’t sleep properly.”

“I did, actually. I’ve just been awake since he started increasing the blood magic he uses to manipulate that fucking Mark.”

“I must be used to such a thing.” Severus doesn’t feel it as a gradual increase; it isn’t, and then it is.

“He’s family. It’s loud,” Nizar mutters. “Go. He probably wishes to gossip over Hogwarts’ Defence teacher again.”

Severus scowls in the early morning darkness. That’s probably accurate. “Will I see you later?”

Even without the candles lit, he can see the edge of Nizar’s mouth turn up. “It’s a school morning. If you’re back in time for breakfast, of course you will.”

Severus rolls his eyes and grasps Nizar’s chin long enough to kiss him. “You are truly, wonderfully irritating.”

“I do try.”

The Wall

Chapter Summary

"I am cunning. Careful is an obvious inclusion."

Severus tells his Slytherins on Thursday that he has business on Friday evening, and won't be available after dinner. Then he warns them all that if they misbehave during his brief absence, they'll be cleaning every bathroom in the castle on Argus Filch's behalf, daily, until they're fortunate enough to graduate.

After dinner, Severus returns to his office, locks and wards the door, and then Apparates to Nizar's sitting room. Nizar is already waiting for him, dressed in a woolen robe that looks fitting for winter in the Highlands—as long as it's not snowing.

"Oh, I have one for that, too, but it's a bit warm for everything except a blizzard," Nizar says. "Reindeer fur."

"Can I borrow it?" Severus asks, thinking of sitting in the stands around the Quidditch Pitch in January and February. "Some of us do not give a fuck about other's opinions as long as we are warm."

"I'll share it with you," Nizar offers with a cheeky smile. "But I think it's a bit much for London."

Severus thinks of London in the 1970s, the '80s, and right now. "I doubt anyone in the city would even bat an eyelash at the sight of a fur cloak, to be honest. However, the point of the evening is to blend in." He nods at the jar on the mantel above the fireplace. "I assume that is Floo Powder, and it's there for obvious reasons."

"I'd hide it, but the only person who comes in here is you. Fortunately, I figured out my own methods of shielding the fireplace from unwanted visitors. You can get in, though. Try not to bring anyone disagreeable with you." Nizar stops talking long enough to give Severus an unhappy look. "We're not using that tonight. Tell me we're not."

"Not fond of the Floo, are we?" Severus asks, pulling the lid from the jar.

"Fuck no," Nizar replies "It's fucking awful. Where are we going?"

"Cokeworth. I don't keep anything from home within this castle except books."

"Your home." Severus turns around to see Nizar staring at him. "The one you promised to burn to the ground the moment you inherited it."

“The very same.” He tosses the powder into the flame. “It proved useful for other matters. Spinner’s End!”

Severus steps out of the Floo, wipes at his sleeves, and watches as his breath drifts up as white vapor. A moment later, green flame roars up in the cold fireplace. Nizar comes reeling out; Severus catches him and saves Nizar from landing on his face.

“Fuck all of that!” Nizar gasps, recovering his balance. “That is a terrible, stupid invention!”

“But convenient for those who are too young to legally Apparate,” Severus says.

“That age limit is *also* a stupid idea!” Nizar breathes out a cloud of white steam. “Chilly.”

“I drain the pipes and leave the boiler off during the winter, as I’m rarely here.” Severus leads the way upstairs. “There are Anti-Apparition wards on the property, so please don’t try to Apparate in or out of here. The results might be fatal.”

“That does explain needing the Floo.”

Severus puts his hand on the doorknob to the second upstairs bedroom, muttering under his breath until the correct phrase comes back to him. He set up that spell in 1984, and he’s never altered it. “Put your hand here, but do not turn the knob. I’m keying you into the bloody wards within the house,” he explains when Nizar wisely hesitates.

With that done, Severus pushes the door open, greeted by another gust of cold, stale air. “I normally use a charm on my clothes when I go into London.” He opens the wardrobe, which has finally lost the stench of stale mothballs after literal years of cramming herbs inside. “But given the discovery that the Underground has magic-users, I’d prefer not to be that conspicuous.”

“Understandable.” Nizar is glancing around the room, taking in yellowing walls, the complete lack of decoration, a writing desk, and a bookshelf that’s half-empty. When Severus stopped coming back to Cokeworth over the summer, he took most of the books to Hogwarts with him.

Severus takes advantage of Nizar’s distraction to throw a navy blue coat at him. “There.”

Nizar drags the fleece-lined corduroy monstrosity off of his head. “I’m taking off wool to put on more wool.”

“Please don’t insult your robe by comparing it to what lines that coat,” Severus replies. “I outgrew that when I was fifteen. It should fit you nicely.”

“Thank you; I hadn’t yet heard my daily reminder that I’m short.” Nizar pulls his robe off over his head and throws it over the foot of Severus’s bed. Severus puts his own right next to it, gritting his teeth against the cold before pulling on a black pea coat he found second-hand. The coat he gave Nizar would be decades out of fashion, but some fool recently decided that corduroy deserved a second chance for reasons he will never understand.

They go back downstairs; Severus opens the back door and gestures for Nizar to step outside. Then he repeats the ward-adjustment, though Nizar swears aloud when his hand contacts the doorknob.

“Sorry. That one bites,” Severus tells him in a bland voice.

Nizar is shaking his hand in the air like he’s trying to rid himself of a clinging insect. “I hadn’t noticed—your house just disappeared.”

“I activated the Fidelius Charm buried in the wards,” Severus steps away from the house. “You’re now keyed into those wards so that the house will recognize you, but this place is for emergencies only. There are Death Eaters that know the charm.”

Nizar nods. “I suppose using it for spying is better than simply burning it to the ground.”

“By the barest margins only. *Maledictio ignis*,” he says, and Nizar watches the house reappear. “If you need to come here for any reason, there is a copse of trees in the back of the garden for Apparition. Better to be cautious.”

Nizar glances at the trees in question. “My entire life is built upon caution, Severus. At least when it isn’t built upon lunacy.”

Severus takes them both to London by Side-Along Apparition, landing in an alley that’s been hidden from Muggle eyes to make a useful Apparition point. “It’s about to get very loud,” he warns Nizar, and then steps out onto Charing Cross Road. Except for a brief flinch, Nizar does nothing more than glance around in curiosity at the shops, the traffic, and finally, the Leaky Cauldron.

“And they can’t see it,” Nizar murmurs, observant enough to note that no one in Muggle dress is going near the pub. “Magical building?”

“It is. That’s the entrance to Diagon Alley. Wizarding London.”

Nizar finally gives him a look of complete dismay. “An *alley*? That’s it?”

“And now you’re going to tell me something I won’t want to hear,” Severus suspects, frowning. “How much more in your day?”

“Where is the original bridge—London Bridge?” Nizar asks, standing on his toes and then scowling as he realizes it doesn’t help for seeing anything useful at all.

“About two miles to the east,” Severus points in the correct direction. “Longer if you walk back down to the Thames and follow the river.”

“Then this land all belonged to the Abbey of Westminster. Æthelred ignored them during his reign, and the monks never gave a damn about magic-users in the area. So...perhaps a square mile devoted to both an abbey and its surrounding magic-using community?”

“As much land as the original settlement of London,” Severus tilts his head and gestures for them to head south down the walkway. “That’s positively depressing.”

“Why do you think I gave you such a horrified look when you told me Hogsmeade was the only magical settlement left on this island?” Nizar narrows his eyes as they pass by a brightly lit display.

“Did you finally find something more garish than Albus’s robes?”

Nizar blinks a few times before his eyes move on to other electric lights and signs. “Actually, I was just trying to figure out what they were advertising. I like the signs better than I liked everyone standing in the street, shouting about what they were selling. The colors are amazing.” Then he winces. “Then again, some of them are combining colors that really weren’t meant to be put next to each other.”

“I’d be more concerned with the cars,” Severus says.

“A little,” Nizar admits, watching a vehicle as it turns against a light and comes far too close to pedestrians in the crosswalk. “I have to admit, it seems more intense down here than in Edinburgh—and the northern folk were driving like lunatics even when they only had the horse and cart to do it with.”

“I would not have willingly climbed into one of those carts.”

“I wasn’t fond of it, either.” Nizar becomes distracted by the scents being generated by a pizza restaurant. “That looks like death on a platter.”

Severus smirks and nudges Nizar’s arm until he keeps walking. “I don’t think they’ll be using that to advertise pizza anytime soon.”

“That’s pizza?” Nizar catches up with him. “Some of our students are weird. I don’t think anyone is meant to eat that much cheese at once, except now I desperately want to try it.”

“Later, perhaps.” Severus doesn’t want to admit that he was too poor to try it when he lived in the Muggle world before and during Hogwarts. He couldn’t bring himself to bother, afterwards.

“Where are we going? I assume your plan was not merely to wander aimlessly around London.”

Severus bites back a smile. “But it was so useful last time. It would be a good idea to see if our Underground friends are monitoring the actual Underground.”

Nizar pauses at the steps leading down into Leicester Square Station, looking around again. “Two thousand years of history, all of it illuminated by light,” he murmurs.

“If you spend the evening being maudlin, I will shove you off the train platform.”

Severus walks through much of the station, both to present more of an obvious target, and to let Nizar explore. Nizar does an excellent job of observing without making it in any way obvious that he’s never seen any of it before. It’s late in the evening, but it’s a Friday, so the tube is packed. Twice Severus thinks he’s nearly lost Nizar in the chaos before he pops into view again.

This time, Nizar has somehow acquired a newspaper. “Do I even want to know?”

Nizar folds it up to make it easier to carry. “Someone left it on a bench. The paper feels really fragile, though.”

“That is because Muggle newsprint is one of the cheapest, most useless papers on this planet.” Severus resists the urge to yank Nizar back by the collar when he peers over the edge of the platform. “If a train removes your face, it will be your own fault.”

Nizar glances at him, decides Severus is being serious, and stops leaning out into the path of an oncoming train. “Well, that would have been an uncomfortable place to lie down in dainty repose, wouldn’t it?”

Severus feels baffled until he remembers their first conversation in the Defence classroom. “Ah. Yes. There are much more infinitely preferable places to do so than the Underground’s railway tracks.”

“Shit, that was fast. That was *fantastic*. We’re riding one of those things and they have the windows shut? That’s stupid,” Nizar says in a rush after one of the northbound trains blows by.

“The rest of us appreciate the windows.” Severus glowers at anyone who tries to impede Nizar’s progress onto the next train and then nudges him again to move him off to one side, just next to the doors. “We don’t have far to go.”

Nizar loses interest in peering out of train windows when the walls close in. Instead, he starts paying attention to his stolen newspaper. By the time they get off the train again, he’s incensed. “That may just be the biggest pile of shit I’ve tried to read in my entire life, including those useless textbooks!”

“Welcome to tabloid reporting in the UK. Please get rid of that,” Severus says, not satisfied until Nizar has shoved the *Daily Express* into a rubbish bin.

“Now I know where the *Daily Prophet* gets it from, but at least they’re more obvious about their character assassination.”

“Are you still bitter about that mid-November article they wrote about you?” Severus asks, stepping onto the escalator. He tries not to grind his teeth; everyone is just *standing* on the damned thing, which means he has to wait for them to realize that it is possible to climb moving stairs. Most pedestrians don’t ever gain that kind of sense.

“Only in the fact that they couldn’t be arsed to come ask anyone in the school about what actually happened. Of course, reading about Fudge trying to sound just and proper about it all without implicating Dolores was really entertaining,” Nizar replies. “Where are we?”

“Trafalgar Square. If you’re willing to walk southeast, I’ll reintroduce you to the dubious pleasure of the Thames.”

“Please. It can’t smell any worse than it did in 1015.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Severus guides them onto the rickety footbridge built alongside the Hungerford Bridge. The swaying has progressed to the point that the only people using it are often fearless, insane teenagers—or those who understand how much weight it would take to cause the damned thing to collapse. In a few more years, Severus might actually be concerned.

“Oh, dear gods, I was wrong.” Nizar sounds like he’s suddenly dealing with a bad cold. “It’s like sea water mated with sulfur and rot.”

“And this is much improved compared to twenty years ago. The Seine in Paris is still far worse,” Severus says.

Nizar laughs. “So you’re saying it hasn’t changed at all.”

He thinks back on the river’s history. “Probably not.”

They’re on the footpath that traverses the outer edge of the Thames’ south bank when Nizar leans in close to him. “We attracted attention, after all.”

Severus frowns. “I haven’t seen or heard anything yet. How do you know?”

Nizar reaches up and pulls the collar of the old coat down, revealing Kanza’s face and flickering tongue. “She can smell them. They were on the train, followed us across the bridge, and they’re about a quarter-mile behind us.”

“Tracking us by magical means, then.” Severus resists the urge to have his wand in his hand. “I hope they’re in the mood to walk all the way to the Tower of London. There is something I wanted to show you.”

“A museum devoted to imprisoning and beheading people?”

He smiles and tries to bury the expression again. “Not that. Do you live for causing me to lose my composure?”

Nizar hooks his arm around Severus’s elbow. “It isn’t the only reason, but it’s a lot of fun. Relax. If they’re going to try anything, they’ll wait until there are no people around to witness it. If they act sooner, Kanza will deal with them.”

Severus makes himself breathe out the tension in his shoulders. “Kanza, I appreciate your presence.”

“She says it’s too fucking cold out here, but your company is worth it. Also, she gets to listen to me complain about the river. She thinks it’s funny.”

“Blackfriar’s Bridge,” Severus identifies it as they walk beneath the structure. The sound of passing motorists overhead is loud after the relative quiet of the south bank.

Nizar looks across the river once they pass the bridge. “That was the western edge of London’s outer wall. I shouldn’t be surprised that there’s nothing left, but it lasted nine hundred years. It still stood when I saw it last.”

“What did I tell you about being maudlin?” When Nizar doesn’t answer, Severus sighs and frees his arm long enough to wrap it around Nizar’s shoulders. “Trust me. I didn’t bring you here to depress you.”

“No, you brought me here for us to figure out why that stupid device is pointing at London.” Nizar lifts his head and then immediately stares to their right. “Am I reading that sign correctly?”

Severus nods. “You are, but it’s not the original Globe Theatre. It’s a reconstruction—and you will not say whatever it is that you’re thinking.”

“What? I swear it’s romantic!” Nizar protests, grinning.

“I’m going to regret this. What?”

Nizar quotes from an unfamiliar play: “*I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.*”

“I see.” Severus presses his lips together. “It’s romantic *and* ribald.”

“I suspect that if Shakespeare ever missed an opportunity to pen a dirty joke, he might have died of a broken heart.”

“He might have done that anyway. No one can agree.” Severus glances down at Nizar. “It... does happen to be more romantic than I expected.”

Nizar nods. “It’s the rest of the play that decides to be uncompromisingly ribald. *Much Ado About Nothing.*”

“I learned my lesson the last time, you know.”

“Which must be why you couldn’t resist asking me what I was thinking,” Nizar returns blithely.

Severus bites his tongue as they step onto the footpath for London Bridge. “Fuck you.”

Nizar looks delighted. “Sure, but let’s wait until after we conceivably need to kill whoever is following us.”

“And there would be your infamous museum,” Severus says when the Tower of London comes into view.

Nizar seems baffled. “I have to admit, I pictured something taller and actually tower-like. That is a fucking fortress, and not the original, either.”

“I believe that was the point. Before I distract you...” Severus puts his hand on Nizar’s arm. “What do you need to do to confirm the presence of one of Potter’s blood relatives?”

Nizar guides them backwards until they’re shaded by the trees along the walk. Then he pulls out a blade from his boot, the one gifted by Helga Hugðilepuf. “Hold on. *Quaerite me sicut*

sanguis sanguinem meum. Sed sanguine est non Voldemort.” He jabs the tip of his left finger with the blade until blood wells up before removing the knife. Severus watches, curious, as the blood splits into two lines and then drips straight down to stain the ground.

Nizar gets a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket, cleans the blade, and then wraps the bit of linen around his finger. “Well, that was sort of useful.”

“You and someone else related to Potter are both currently in London—if it isn’t Potter himself.” Severus looks down the walk out of the corner of his eye. No one stands out, but he knows that whoever is following them is getting closer.

“It means that Dumbledore’s device is most assuredly *not* pointing at Surrey, else the blood would have tried to flow in that direction before dripping off of my hand.” Nizar slips the knife back into his boot. “I really want to find out why this sort of blood magic can’t see the Dursleys.”

“Not tonight. It’s getting late, and I did want to show you something first.” Severus leads them along the hedge until he finds the opening, walking into the eastern Tower Garden.

“Are we trespassing in someone’s private garden?”

“No, it’s a public garden.” Severus points at the wall when it becomes visible through the trees. “And that would be why.”

Nizar follows the line of his finger and then his jaw falls open. “The wall.”

“Most of it was hidden until the bombings in World War II,” Severus tells him in a soft voice, following as Nizar walks up to the high wall of ancient stone to place his hand on it. “Not all of it is gone. There are more than a few places in London where you can see the original Roman construction.”

Nizar nods and leans forward until he can rest his head against the stone. “I have no idea how to thank you for this.”

“You already have,” Severus says. Nizar lifts his head to glance at him. “A long time ago. I do believe it started with C. S. Lewis.”

Nizar swallows visibly. “I thought you were going to throw me from a train platform if I was maudlin again?”

“There are acceptable reasons for maudlin thoughts.” Severus freezes in place as he hears a twig snap near the garden entrance. “There they are, and faster than I thought they’d be.”

“Oh, our company caught up with us,” Nizar says. Severus’s skin crawls as he watches Nizar’s features shift until they’re far younger, paler, and elongated. His hair lengthens into a straight, shining red-gold that is, at least, not Weasley ginger.

“If they’re *his*, you probably shouldn’t be seen in my company,” Nizar whispers. “It’s not common knowledge that I’m a Metamorphmagus, after all.”

“Could you have picked someone aside from Godric?” Severus asks, drawing his wand from his sleeve and hiding his grip on it with his coat. “Two,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t pick Godric. This is what Godric’s eldest son Ozymandias looked like when he was a teenager.” Nizar rests his hand on his left wrist, putting his wand in easy reach.

“I reserve the right to mock that name later this evening.”

A cloaked shadow glides out of the darkness of the trees. “Severus. Fancy meeting you in London.”

“Osbourne,” Severus greets him, letting his lip curl up in disgust. Pure-blooded Death Eaters never bother with trying to blend in with the Muggles, relying on Disillusionment Charms or Obliviation spells to avoid notice. Careless bastards. “Why have you been following me?”

“Well, you made a new friend. I got curious,” Osbourne Nott replies. “Who’s this gentlemen here?”

Severus scowls at Nott. “This is a potential ally to the Dark Lord, and being followed for three miles is making him leery as to whether it’s in his best interest to continue to pursue the idea.”

Nott doesn’t look convinced. “He looked quite a bit different a few moments ago.”

Severus notices that Nizar is tracking a third shadow in the trees. The sound of the street is very close. If a fight breaks out, they’ll have to hex the idiots to hell and back and then Apparate before the Aurors turn up.

“On l’appelle Jus de Poly, imbécile,” Nizar says scathingly. *“Ou ce concept est-il trop complexe pour votre petit cerveau?”*

“He certainly has your number, Osbourne.”

Severus says an entire litany of foul words in his head when Beryl Rothschild joins Nott, her hood pushed back to reveal her pristine features and silver-streaked hair. “I’m not convinced, dear Severus,” she says. “You see, the man beside you looked quite a bit like a certain portrait I once viewed in our Common Room.”

“And we have orders about that portrait, don’t we?” Nott looks smug. “We can take him off your hands now, Severus, and that fool Dumbledore won’t ever be the wiser.”

Rothschild rolls her eyes. “Osbourne, you have exactly the intelligence that Slytherin accused you of.”

“Oh, Beryl.” Nizar’s features are morphing back to normal. “I’m so very disappointed in you.”

They can’t return to Voldemort, Severus thinks. Not if Rothschild is already certain that Severus’s loyalty lies elsewhere.

“He just wants to meet with you, Professor Slytherin,” Rothschild says. “My word on it.”

“Your word is rubbish—SEVERUS!”

Severus loses the air in his lungs when Nizar plows into him, shoving them both down into the grass. A streak of green light tears a gouge in the retaining wall to the left of where he’d just been standing.

Then he has no time to think at all as he finds himself in a furious duel with Nott. The man is an idiot, but he’s also swift. Severus has to end this quickly. Rothschild is an excellent duelist, and he has no idea who their third damned uninvited guest is—

Rothschild’s gleeful hiss of, “*Crucio*,” is followed by a flash of yellow light, and Nizar screams.

Severus’s blood turn to ice. He flings Nott away with a fierce swipe of his wand, watching in bloodthirsty satisfaction as Nott strikes a tree hard enough to rattle its limbs.

Nizar is trapped against the old stone wall, pinned by two different jets of yellow light from Rothschild and Grey Hobart’s wands. His jaw is clenched shut against another scream; Severus is amazed that Nizar is still on his feet at all.

Severus points his wand at Rothschild and hexes her to get her attention. That breaks one of the Cruciatus castings, and until he gets rid of this woman, it will have to be enough.

Rothschild gives him a look of thwarted outrage as she quickly pats her sleeve to put out the fire. “Severus, you shouldn’t have done that.”

Severus bares his teeth at her. “I always wanted to see if you could hold your own in a true duel instead of relying on sycophants.”

“There are some things one should not wish for, Severus,” Rothschild replies, but then her eyes widen in shock at the sight of something behind him.

“¡*Maldición de la muerte!*” Nizar rasps. Hobart lets out a startled *gurk* when the green light of the Killing Curse strikes him before he topples over. Severus doesn’t dare turn around. Instead, he points his wand at Rothschild, curse on his lips, before Goddamned Nott ambushes him with a Binding Hex. Severus falls to his knees, fighting to nonverbally cast the counter-spell.

“Should’ve watched your back, Snape.” Nott’s laughter is a grating distraction.

“You should watch your front.” Severus frees his wand and hexes Nott with such strength that it flings him into the retaining wall.

He turns to find Rothschild advancing on Nizar’s position. That’s enough to enrage him, fueling the spell he needs.

“Beryl.” Severus waits until she jerks her head around to look at him. “*Avada Kedavra*.” Rothschild drops without making a sound.

Severus flinches as another green light shoots past him, far too close for comfort. Nizar is propped up on his elbows, wand raised. Severus turns around just in time to see Nott fall face-first into the grass.

“F-fuck. Fucking Cruciatus,” Nizar whispers. “Are you all right?”

Severus checks to make certain there are no more unwelcome guests lingering in the garden before he limps over to Nizar. He has no idea when he wrenched his knee, and no time to see to repairing it. “We have to go. Right now.”

Severus takes Nizar’s arm and Side-Along Apparates them to the copse of trees behind the house at Spinner’s End. He leans against a tree, shaking. It feels like he’s on the verge of collapse, even though the entire encounter took less than two minutes.

Duels don’t normally hinder him so much, mentally or physically. Severus grabs hold of a branch and breathes as fear tries to rule him.

Nizar. He was terrified for Nizar, not for himself.

“Anyone lurking?” Nizar asks, his voice pitched so low Severus almost doesn’t hear him at all.

That finally stirs him to check the wards. “No.” Severus hoists Nizar’s arm up and over his shoulders so they can walk to the house.

“I’m hiding you upstairs behind that warded door, Nizar,” he explains after he gets the back door open. The parlor is even colder than the night outside. “I have to go to the Dark Lord, right now, and be the very first to explain why he’s suddenly missing three followers.”

Nizar scowls. “That is a stupid idea.”

“If not me, it will be someone else, and that endangers my position.” Severus helps Nizar get up the stairs, trying not to wince. His right knee is definitely angry, twisted the wrong way at some point during the duel. “I can use the truth to my advantage, Nizar. If any of the Dark Lord’s spies were watching, I can tell the bastard that they interrupted an attempt to convince you not to think of the Dark Lord as an enemy, and those three idiots probably ruined any chance of it.”

Nizar lets out a brief, hollow laugh. “At least they’re too dead to worry about disappointing him.”

Severus opens the bedroom door and helps Nizar sprawl out on the twin bed. The fact that Nizar isn’t protesting speaks volumes as to how much strength Rothschild and Hobart were putting into their curses. Severus places both of their robes over Nizar to keep him warm. “Will you be all right on your own?”

“Yes.” Nizar closes his eyes. “I’m not expiring, or even in danger of it. I just hurt all over. Those stairs are fucking loud, too. If anyone comes up here, I’ll know about it, but you might need a new door afterwards.”

Nizar doesn't seem to have any bad habits about lying in regards to his injuries. Severus will have to accept that he's speaking the truth. "All right. I'll be back in an hour. I have a morning detention to use as an excuse not to linger in that damned manor."

Nizar forces his left hand to unclench, revealing red crescents dug into his palms. "Fucking Cruciatus. Be careful, Severus."

"I am cunning. Careful is an obvious inclusion," Severus replies. He shuts the door, makes certain the wards are alight, and then rushes downstairs to the fireplace in the parlor.

Severus takes a deep breath, mentally composing himself. Stillness settles over trembling limbs; scattered thoughts smooth out like an undisturbed pond. Better.

The Floo powder creates green flame in the cold fireplace. "Riddle Manor!"

* * * *

Severus ignores Pettigrew's pathetic squeaking as Voldemort kicks him away from his armchair. Then he hides a pleased smile as Talbot goes down, screaming and writhing under the Cruciatus. He never liked Talbot, anyway.

"He truly was considering this?" Voldemort finally asks when he is done venting the full force of his anger.

Severus inclines his head. "He was at least pondering the notion of...neutrality. Nizar Slytherin, having seen more of modern Britain, understands the cost a magical war would wage. He would prefer to see no magical deaths."

"And then Beryl, Osbourne, and Grey decided to intervene." Voldemort lets out a dramatic sigh of disappointment. "You tried to convince them otherwise, of course."

"Of course, My Lord," Severus replies. "But Beryl Rothschild has never trusted that my loyalty to My Lord is unwavering. She believed Nizar Slytherin and I were in London for other purposes, and her lack of trust spurred the others to foolish actions."

Voldemort nods, settling into his armchair. "Nizar Slytherin truly cast the Killing Curse while in the midst of the torture of the Cruciatus Curse?"

"He did, My Lord. I have no idea how he could do so. I have never been able to lift my wand while in the grasp of Cruciatus."

"Absolutely fascinating," Voldemort says in a low voice. "I have been subjected to that curse only twice in my life, Severus. The second time, I thought I might be capable of resisting, but another interrupted the casting before I could do so. I will have to consider this strength during my next meeting with my great-granduncle."

“I am sorry I was not successful, My Lord,” Severus ventures.

Voldemort waves off his apology in a genial manner. “Severus, my loyal one—you made a valiant effort. Its failure was not your fault. I am only disappointed that you killed them instead of bringing them before me.”

Severus looks down at the floor. “They left me no choice. I will keep trying to sway Nizar Slytherin, My Lord. It will have to be a far subtler attempt, however.”

“Of course, Severus, but my plans are swiftly approaching fruition. He will no doubt still be upset when we next meet. Go,” Voldemort adds. “I understand you have morning responsibilities at Hogwarts. I will call for you when you are needed.”

“My Lord.” Severus bows low, the proper gesture of respect for a departure, and then goes to the fireplace. If he leaves by Apparition instead of using his same manner of arrival, it would be an act that attracted attention, if not outright suspicion. He isn’t in the mood for any more of that tonight.

When he returns to Spinner’s End, Severus sits down in the chair that faces the fireplace, his wand out, and watches to see if Voldemort sends anyone to follow him. After ten minutes pass, he puts his wand away and goes back upstairs.

When Severus opens the door, Nizar is sitting up in bed waiting for him. He’s ditched the coat, put his own robe back on, and is trying to mummify himself in Severus’s robe. “You’re all right?”

Severus nods. “I could ask you the same.”

“Answer is still: fuck Cruciatus.” Nizar tries to get up and falls right back down onto the bed. “And then there is that.”

Severus goes to help Nizar stand up. “We have to return by Floo.”

“Oh, gods.” Nizar looks entertainingly disappointed. “Why?”

“Because, even though others might not be able to Apparate within the school, the Headmaster is always aware of when someone is doing so within Hogwarts.”

“That must be driving him mental,” Nizar says with forced cheer.

“Albus keeps asking me if you’re doing it. I tell him to ask you. I take it he hasn’t done so.”

“Probably worried about the answer,” Nizar mutters. “Or Dumbledore thinks to one day use it against me—which I have no idea how he believes that would be a valid tool for manipulation. I’m tied into the school’s magic. It’s not a huge secret; I just don’t tell people.”

“You just told me,” Severus responds in mimicry of their first conversation regarding Apparition within Hogwarts. He tosses what he hopes will be his final bit of Floo Powder for the evening.

“Yes, but I *like* you,” Nizar says testily as he watches green flame emerge from the cold fireplace. “I hate Floo travel.”

“Do stop whinging until we get back to Hogwarts. I didn’t want Albus to be aware of our schedule this evening.” Severus names his own quarters as their destination. Nizar clings to him like a panicked leech until they spin out of the fireplace and promptly land on the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Nizar lifts his head. “Ow.”

Severus nods. “Agreed.”

“Help me to the bathroom, will you? I need to...not be a disaster.” Nizar rolls over onto his side and uses the sofa to pull himself up. “I hate that fucking curse.”

Severus stands and helps Nizar back to his feet again. “Why the bathroom?”

“I need running water, and I need to teach you the fucking spell to get rid of this shit. I don’t want Cruciatus damage lingering in my body. I hate mornings enough as it is.”

Severus sits Nizar down on the edge of the bathtub and helps him to remove his robe, then his shirt when Nizar asks. “Bloodstains show up on black cloth, at least to my eyes,” he explains. Then he holds out Kanza, who is trembling.

“Is she all right?” Severus asks, casting a warming charm on one of the stones of the floor for the basilisk to curl up on.

“Kanza is technically immune to Cruciatus...but she becomes terrified for me, and was in a position where she couldn’t act to protect me. They don’t like—basilisks don’t like not being able to do their jobs.” Nizar gets out Helga’s knife, yanking the sheath off. “The incantation. It’s a...” He frowns. “A full body sweep with the wand. You start at the point furthest from the wound I’m about to open, and the chanted counter-curse pushes the damage out with the blood. Messy, but efficient. There are other ways to do this, but I can’t fucking think right now.”

“The chant?” Severus asks, watching Nizar waver in place while sitting upright.

“*Sanus os et sanguis. Lenire nervis et respiratio. Lenire in animum.*”

Severus repeats the mantra to make certain he has it right. Nizar nods in approval, turns on the cold water for the bathtub, and jabs the tip of the dagger right back into the same spot he’d bled from in London. This time the wound is much deeper, the blood running freely.

It’s odd, casting the counter-curse while Nizar holds his bleeding hand underneath flowing water. Severus can *feel* the magic in the words, stronger than he’s used to. Even Vulnera Sanentur doesn’t have the same power to it.

It’s also strange that he knows the moment the counter-curse is no longer needed. “Nizar?”

Nizar fumbles for the tap and turns off the water. “I’m all right. Water is much more pleasant than fire, but I feel like wrung-out hell.”

Severus sneezes three times in rapid succession. “Fucking damned mold!” he swears. He tries to glare at Nizar when the man laughs at him, but can’t quite manage it. “I need a bath. You’re welcome to join me as I choke another mint plant to death.”

Nizar smiles. “That sounds nice.”

Lounging in hot water imbued with mint oil does a lot to settle his thoughts, and to pull the last of the adrenaline from his limbs. Holding Nizar against his chest, amusedly studying the stark paleness of his arms compared to Nizar’s bronze skin, helps Severus to relax in a way he doesn’t manage very often.

“You’re thinking about something,” Nizar says in a sleepy mumble.

“You don’t have to answer, given the interesting night we just had, but I am curious how you managed to cast a spell while being tortured with the Cruciatus Curse,” Severus admits.

Nizar takes one of Severus’s hands, exploring Severus’s fingers with an air of intense concentration. “I don’t like to feel trapped,” he finally says in a quiet voice. “I never have. I can’t—I used to panic. I put a lot of effort into making sure I either could not be trapped, or I could work through the trap to escape.”

Severus closes his fingers around Nizar’s hands. “Do you mean to tell me that you had someone repeatedly torture you with the Cruciatus Curse until you could defend yourself?”

“Godric,” Nizar confirms. “He hated doing it, but he also understood *why* I wanted it. He was grateful later. That magician I told you of, the one I said I killed for hitting me with Cruciatus? We were ambushed one day while far from Hogwarts.

“Godric took a blow to the head and was helpless on the ground. Salazar was trying to defend our children. I was covering Marion while she flung spells at our enemies when one of their magicians slipped past our guard. A minute into the curse, I lifted my wand and killed him. Our kids learned a lot of naughty words in Castilian that day from Salazar, and a lot more from Marion and Godric in Gaelic and Old English. I was just happy the fucker was dead.”

Severus blinks a few times. “Nizar?”

“Mm?”

“You’re a fucking lunatic.”

Nizar laughs, a brief, tired huff of air. “Yes, but I thought you were aware of that by now.”

“How did you stand to reside in a portrait frame if you dislike being trapped so much?” Severus asks.

“I don’t know. I imagine there must have been something woven into the magic that kept it from being a concern,” Nizar says. “Those who created it knew me very well.”

Severus reaches up and runs his fingers through Nizar's wet hair. He can't listen to this and offer nothing in return. "I was...I was afraid I would lose you."

"Pfft. Not to those idiots," Nizar replies. "I refuse to die by an idiot's wand. I refuse to die because of Voldemort. I am going to grind him into dust, and then I'm going to enjoy my time with you until you flee for the hills to escape a lunatic Slytherin."

Severus tightens his hold on Nizar. "I have no intention of ever doing so."

* * * *

Far too early on Saturday morning, Severus wakes up to a corporeal phoenix Patronus on his bedpost. Once it realizes he's awake, it opens its beak and says, "I received interesting news this morning. When you have a moment, Severus?"

When the Patronus vanishes, Severus scowls. "How the hell does he always make such pleasant requests sound like an order?"

"Because they are," Nizar mutters into his pillow. "If he's irritable about three dead Death Eaters in London, just blame me for killing them all."

"And let you take all the credit?" Severus gives Nizar an indulgent look. "By all means, continue to sleep."

Nizar takes Severus's pillow and covers his head with it. "I'm *trying*."

Severus dresses, glances into his bedroom long enough to see that Nizar has turned his bed into a nest, before leaving his quarters to go upstairs. His Slytherins are often late risers, so there is no one passing through the dungeon corridors but himself and the Bloody Baron, who gives Severus a brief nod before disappearing through the wall.

Instead of giving the password, Severus scratches Galfridus the gargoyle behind his notched ears. The gargoyle purrs in delight and allows the door to the moving stairwell to slide open. *That*, Severus thinks, *is so much more efficient than a password.*

Dumbledore offers him sherbet lemons, which causes Severus to glare at him in early morning disgust. Then he offers tea, which Severus is willing to accept. He'll happily discuss murdering the deserving over tea.

"Do you think Voldemort suspects?" Dumbledore asks after the salient events in London have been discussed. Severus is not giving him any details that are not directly relevant to Voldemort. Those are his and Nizar's; no one else's. His only true concern is Theodore Nott; Osbourne was a distant older cousin, and Severus doesn't know if Theodore will mourn the loss.

“Not at all. He was more upset about a potential failure of that false neutrality.” Severus puts the empty teacup aside. “However, given how blatant the Dark Lord’s followers chose to be, and how quickly rumor of that encounter will spread, I think it is past time that Nizar be introduced to the Order.”

Dumbledore frowns. “You know full well how many of our allies view Slytherin.” As if Severus needs the reminder of how many think ill of his House.

“Everyone does like to conveniently forget that Andromeda is also of Slytherin House,” Severus says at his driest. “However, those idiots have also seen the results of Nizar’s instruction of Hogwarts’ students, and how far they’ve all advanced in just over a month’s time. If nothing else, Arthur and Molly will keep the impolite muttering to tolerable levels.”

“They do speak fondly of Nizar,” Dumbledore says thoughtfully. “Very well. I did want to have our last meeting before the winter holiday separated us. Sunday at ten o’clock, then, at Grimmauld Place, where you and Sirius can trade childish barbs as you will.”

Severus nods. “I’ll inform Minerva and Nizar.” He is also plotting to convince Nizar to get rid of that shrieking portrait of Walburga Black.

The Order

Chapter Summary

“Did you have fun wandering about in London?”

Before noon on Sunday, Nizar allows Severus to Side-Along Apparate him to London. They meet up with a small group of Hogwarts’ teachers—aside from Dumbledore, there is only Minerva, and Filius. Nizar can’t decide if the other staff are being sensible, or if they’re being idiots.

There is a row of attached, brick-built houses, all of them exactly alike but for some variations in their window décor. Nizar can feel the presence of a Fidelius Charm, like the one Severus has on the house in Spinner’s End.

“They’re not very imaginative, are they,” Nizar says in a mild voice. Unlike the areas Severus showed him on Friday, this part of London feels ill.

“Townhouses were built for function over form.” Severus leans down close to his ear. “Normally it is a mere address, but it was recently changed. *Hope is stronger, faith is sterner.*”

“Well, that’s a charming phrase that doesn’t sound like a fucking portent at all.” Nizar watches as the townhouses slide apart to reveal another identical townhouse between Number Eleven and Number Thirteen. Unlike its neighbors, this one has a strong sense of magic. Its exterior is also filthy, the windows grimy with dirt both inside and out.

“Albus chose it,” Severus explains as Nizar follows him up the walk to Number Twelve of Grimmauld Place. “After Potter’s disappearance, he seemed to feel that we all needed the reminder.”

“That’s less a reminder and more a slap upside the head,” Nizar replies.

Dumbledore sounds cheerful. “I am not exactly known for subtlety.”

Nizar glances at the old man’s robes and immediately looks away. *That*, he thinks, *is a fucking understatement.*

The door opens to their knock to reveal a Metamorphmagus; Nizar can always recognize the magic. Her hair is a vibrant purple with shades of red, pink, and blue shining in it that Nizar suspects she is entirely unaware of. It’s still less blinding than Dumbledore’s robes.

“Come in!” the Metamorphmagus invites them, smiling. “Everyone remember to keep it to a dull roar. We don’t want to wake the harpy portrait.”

Nizar follows the others into a structure he immediately wants to escape from. The house has poor lighting, smells like dust died in it centuries ago, and has a feeling of oppressive, abject misery. “How very pleasant.”

“You get used to it,” a taller man offers once the Metamorphmagus shuts the door behind them. Given his lank appearance and the faint scars across his face, Nizar places him as Remus Lupin, the only other competent Defence teacher at Hogwarts aside from a fucking Death Eater.

Now that the association has been made, Nizar will have to give thought to asking Severus if he can tolerate a Wolfsbane-treated werewolf in the castle again. Fred and George graduate in June, and Nizar’s next potential assistants are too young.

“Voices down,” Lupin warns them. “We got rid of the other portraits, but the harpy...we’re not even sure if removing the wall would get rid of her portrait,” he says, indicating velvet drapes that hide part of the wall opposite the door.

Nizar hears Severus sigh in frustration when the Metamorphmagus trips over an upright container that looks like it used to be part of a British cave troll, sending it crashing to the floor. “Sorry!” she exclaims. Her apology is all but inaudible as the curtains whip open, the portrait shrieking in sudden viciousness: “BLOOD TRAITORS! MUDBLOODS! FILTH! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!”

Nizar stares at the portrait, appalled. “Walburga?”

The old woman with grey hair and a sour, nasty expression on her face pauses mid-rant. “Eh? Who is that? More *filth*?”

Nizar strides right up to the painting and glares at her. “WALBURGA BLACK, YOU WILL MIND YOUR FUCKING MANNERS!”

“Who is this? Who are you—” The color drains from Walburga’s painted face. “Professor Slytherin.”

“Why the fuck are you shouting at these people?” Nizar yells. “When I knew you, you at least had some bloody fucking courtesy, woman!”

Walburga shrinks back from him. “I’m allowed to have my own say in my own house!”

“Not when you’re spouting pure fucking stupidity!” Nizar retorts, clamping his hands down on the portrait frame to prevent her from leaving when she tries to slip off to one side. “I know for a fact that your parents taught you decorum and hospitality, Walburga Black! What they didn’t tell you, I sure as fuck *did*. YOU ARE A SLYTHERIN, AND YOU KNOW HOW TO ACT LIKE ONE!”

Walburga flinches. “Yes, sir. You did,” she mutters in complete resentment.

“Are you going to be shrieking at anyone else who enters this house?”

"I don't want blood traitors and Mudbloods in my house!" Walburga declares, trying to look haughty.

"You're dead. It's not your fucking house," Nizar replies in a flat voice. "Don't encourage me, Walburga. You are going to remember what you were taught and behave yourself, or I will rip your essence out of this portrait and turn it into ash."

Walburga's eyes widen. "You wouldn't dare."

"I'm a Slytherin, Walburga. You know I would."

Walburga crosses her arms and scowls. "A good Slytherin is subtle."

"Screaming at people is not fucking subtle now, is it?" Nizar asks, still glaring at her.

Her scowl deepens. "No."

"Kindly knock it the fuck off, then. Canvas of ash, Walburga."

"Silence is subtle," Walburga finally offers, her expression souring even further.

"Yes, it is. That's a very wise decision you've just made, because this fucking sticking charm wouldn't stop *me*," Nizar says, smiling. "Good day, Walburga."

Walburga gnashes her teeth but manages a pseudo-polite, "Good day, Professor."

Nizar steps away from the portrait; Walburga promptly shuts her curtains to sulk in private. When he turns around, everyone is staring at him with varying expressions of pleasure, disbelief, or in Severus's case, barely restrained smugness. "What?"

The Metamorphmagus grins. "That was beautiful. I'm never going to forget that as long as I live!"

"It was most certainly effective, if colorful," Minerva agrees. Even Filius looks approving. Dumbledore is once again gazing at Nizar as if he's some odd and strange new form of life. Nizar doesn't let his gaze linger to try to find out why; he hates those lime green robes and would destroy them if the opportunity ever presented itself.

"I was entirely set on not liking you, given who you are," another man says, "but you just made my mother behave herself."

Nizar glances over by the stairs to see they've been joined by a pale-skinned man in a short-cut velvet green robe with a brocade waistcoat beneath. He has solid black, curling hair that hangs to his shoulders, and his facial hair is precisely groomed, but there is a wildness in his grey eyes that Nizar often associates with those who've seen one loss too many.

"Sirius Black." Nizar is certain; he looks far too much like Regulus, though Regulus Black was taller, with dark green eyes and broader features. "I'm sorry I lost my temper in your home."

Black glances at the shut curtains. “I’m really, truly not. As Tonks already mentioned—I’m going to treasure that moment for the rest of my life.”

“She used to be...better. Not by much, mind, but at least more polite about it.”

“Not in any of the time I’ve ever known her,” Black replies. “Welcome to Grimmauld Place, Sir Portrait. It’s hell on earth, but it keeps the rain off your head.”

“Then why stay here?” Nizar asks, curious.

“I’m still wanted by the Ministry for a Dementor’s rapidly administered kiss,” Black explains. “They can’t find this place, and I can’t prove I’m innocent unless someone bags Pettigrew and brings him in as proof that he’s not dead.”

“Nothing anyone says is doing a damned thing to convince me that the Ministry’s existence is a good idea,” Nizar says in disgust. “Didn’t you work for those people, Minerva?”

Minerva lets out a dignified snort. “Why do you think I *stopped* working for them, Nizar?”

“How the hell does Arthur put up with them?”

“You’ve met Arthur?” Black and Lupin both ask Nizar at the same time.

Nizar looks back and forth at them. Severus is correct; they’ve both matured and yet still not managed to step far beyond their distrust of anything Slytherin. “Arthur, Molly, *and* the chair in their parlor. With my forehead. Fuck Floo travel.”

“I’m confused,” Nizar hears Lupin say as Tonks shoves Lupin and Black off down the hallway. “I think I like him!”

Nizar tilts his head. “Are they—are they all three courting each other?”

“I hope not,” Filius says. “Nymphadora is Sirius Black’s first cousin once removed. I know such relations are a Black family tradition, but I like to believe both of them know better!”

“Feel free to wander the public areas of the home,” Dumbledore invites, moving off down the hallway. “The others often run late as duties or other obligations slow their arrival.”

“You’d think he owns the place,” Nizar says under his breath.

“Some days I think he’s half-convinced that he does,” Severus replies, frowning. “Be cautious. Molly tried to clean this fire hazard over the summer, but there are plentiful traps left behind by a bunch of paranoid cretins. I’ll be in the library. Against his better judgement—though I’m not sure he has any at all—Black is allowing me to attempt to unravel some of those entrapments over the books. Unless you’d like to assist?”

“Maybe in a bit,” Nizar says. “I’d actually like to look around first. The invitation was granted, after all.”

Severus looks down at him as the corner of his mouth turns up. “Spying? Such a Slytherin.”

“Spying was how one survived at Court when words failed.”

Nizar wanders around the house, top floor on down. The fourth floor has a curving iron staircase that goes up to a flat door in the ceiling—attic, he supposes. The only two rooms are behind closed doors, labeled as bedrooms for Sirius Black and Regulus Black. He’s half-tempted to open Regulus’s door, but can’t bring himself to do so. Regulus spoke to him; like Severus, Regulus had asked for his name.

The stairwell is no better on his way down than it was for the climb. It’s dark and dingy, and the carpet tread smells of mold and dust. The third and second floors are home to musty hallways with closed doors, though an open bedroom on the third floor has a bloody hippogriff nesting inside on the bed. “Why?” Nizar asks the hippogriff, who just gives him a disdainful look and ignores him.

Beyond the presence of one random hippogriff, the townhouse doesn’t strike Nizar as a cheerful home at all, but he has dwelled in some completely horrendous piles of shit in his day. This one is at least solidly built.

The first floor has another closed bedroom door, but also an open entryway into a large... parlor? Drawing room? Nizar isn’t certain what the correct term is, only that it’s the biggest space he’s found in the house so far that isn’t a stairwell. On one side of the room is a cold fireplace with portraits placed above it.

“Well, hello,” Nizar mutters under his breath. He wonders if Walburga warned them; Lycorus, Hesper, Alexia, and Eduardus are frozen in place, as if they fear moving will incite his wrath. “Oh, calm down. As long as you’re behaving yourselves, I don’t care.”

The latter three of the siblings relax, but Lycorus doesn’t. “Oh, I suppose that tells me who *isn’t* behaving, doesn’t it?” Nizar asks the man’s portrait. Lycorus is the only one who sent children to Hogwarts, but Nizar remembers hearing rumors that Hesper and Eduardus had married spouses the family didn’t approve of; if they had children, they were home-schooled or sent to a magical school elsewhere in Europe. “Where is Phoebe’s portrait?”

Lycorus scowls, but the others shake their heads or shrug. They don’t know, then.

Hesper eyes Lycorus in disapproval, smiles at Nizar, and then points behind him. The opposite wall and large sections of the walls adjacent to it have been devoted to a literal family tree. He wanders over, curious, and finds the eldest siblings at the base of the trunk. That must have been when they moved in to this home, perhaps, as the Black family tree did not begin with those five. The Black family is much older than the mere 1800s, and Nizar saw enough of them in his House’s Common Room to know it.

Searching the lines brings him to Nymphadora Tonks, daughter of Edward Tonks and Andromeda Black. That’s nice to know; he’d liked Andromeda during her time as a student.

Andromeda, Edward, and Nymphadora’s portraits have all been burnt, though he can still make out hints of faces and names. Then there is Bellatrix, married to Rodolphus Lestrage, fortunately with *no* children. Last of the three is Narcissa Black, linked to Lucius Malfoy with only Draco’s portrait beneath.

Walburga Black married her own first cousin, one generation removed. Nizar sighs over that decision, thinking it fortunate that Sirius and Regulus Black weren't born with physical ailments. There are far too many close relations on this stupid tree who decided it was a brilliant idea to marry.

Sirius Black's name is burnt from the tree; Regulus's portrait has a listed date of death for November of 1980. Nizar would like to find out what happened to him, but not even Severus knows. Regulus is one of the few who truly, literally disappeared.

Nizar peers closer when he realizes that Sirius Black's name is linked to two other names, also burnt from the family tree. Below those two names is yet another scorch-hidden addition: H— —t-r.

"What the fuck?"

Nizar decides that Severus needs to be introduced to the Black family tree. He finds him in the ground floor library and drags him back up the stairs to the tree room. "Take a look."

Severus is distinctly unimpressed. "Ah, a map dedicated to inbreeding."

"Yes, that too," Nizar says. "It's also dead, or close enough to it as to make little difference. See how flat and lifeless it is?"

"Yes." Severus reaches out just long enough to touch the tree. "If it's like a few others I've glimpsed, it should have a hint of texture, but this is like touching a mere wall."

"Exactly. I think I how to fix it, too. Reanimation wasn't one of my focuses—that's a branch of necromancy, one of the more respectable sorts. But..." Nizar takes out his wand and touches it to the roots of the tree. "The basics are fairly straightforward. Also, I really hope I'm not about to enrage our host."

"Nizar, you are truly underestimating how much Sirius Black loathes this house."

"That's useful, then. I wanted to practice on something, anyway." Nizar watches as the tree brightens, its branches invigorated and curling with new life. The portraits within the tree awaken within their cluster of spring green leaves. They are no longer static, repeated images of the same male or female face, but representations of the people themselves, capable of moving and speaking. Nizar can see the shine of gold in long paths that allow a specific individual's family lines to be traced back from the tree's source point, though the paths fade again as the repairs are completed. Making the alteration permanent is the difficult part; whatever originally anchored the tree to life doesn't seem to exist anymore. Nizar finally gives up and simply ties it to London bedrock, which still sings with magic if you go deep enough. The Romans settled here for a reason, after all.

"That's amazing." Severus is gazing at the tree in rapt fascination. "Oh, now that's intriguing. I didn't know a Black had ever lowered themselves enough to marry a Potter."

Nizar follows Severus's finger to a woman who is definitely of Black's family descent, given her grey eyes and curling brown hair. Dorea Black is smiling at the man connected to her by

marriage, one Charlus Alistair Potter. There is a faint hint of bronze to his skin, but unlike the last two male Potters of that line, he shows no signs of having wild hair. His is black, but hangs in gentle waves to his shoulders; his eyes are not emerald green or hazel, but a placid blue.

“Interesting. However...” Nizar takes a glance at the part of the tree in question, which has been fully repaired—all of the scorch marks are gone. “I want you to look at Sirius’s repaired portrait.”

Severus stares at the branches that connect Sirius Black, James Potter, and Lily Evans in a triad marriage. “All three of them,” he whispers, his fingers resting next to Lily Evans’ smiling face. “I do hope it was after Black gained some semblance of intelligence.”

“If you were not exaggerating her own intelligence, then he definitely had to have become a better, more thoughtful person before that time.”

“I question your taste, Lily,” Severus says to the portrait, who laughs at him. It’s not a mocking sound, but sheer delight.

“Sirius Black isn’t Harry Potter’s godfather. He’s Harry Potter’s second father by wizarding law.” Severus stands back from the tree. “Sodding—if the man had been given a trial, and had been able to produce the Ministry document of the marriage...”

“It might have exonerated him, yes. At the very least, he would have been able to explain why he wasn’t their Keeper for the home’s Fidelius Charm,” Nizar says.

“They wouldn’t have accepted it.”

Nizar turns around to see that Sirius Black is standing behind them, hands in his robe pockets as he gazes at the renewed family tree.

“Why not?” Severus asks. He doesn’t sound combative, merely curious.

“Aside from the lack of a trial? Our witnesses were Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. A werewolf and a potential suspect, from a document involving yet another suspect.” Black shakes his head. “The Ministry in those days wouldn’t have given a damn, and I was still suffering under some sort of jinx Peter hit me with. If they *had* been willing to take a look at documents, I was in no shape to tell them. It took weeks for that shit to wear off, and by the time it did, I’d been in Azkaban the entire time. Even today I doubt it would matter much. It will take Pettigrew’s capture to convince anyone that there should be a trial.”

“Seriously, none of this is making me like the Ministry at all,” Nizar mutters. The old kingdoms might have been annoying in his day, but what duels didn’t settle, truth serums and binding judgments would.

“Not very fond of them, myself,” Black says dryly. “Were triad marriages a thing in your day, Sir Portrait?”

“Sometimes,” Nizar says. “It was certainly more common then than now.”

Sirius nods. “The war was on, so we didn’t tell anyone, especially when Lily got pregnant and that stupid prophecy came about. They went into hiding, but since the Order still needed a man capable of aiming a wand...Lily and James didn’t want me to be more of a target than I already was.”

Nizar points at the blur next to Harry Potter’s name and portrait, which is turned away from them in blatant refusal to be viewed. “What’s this?”

Sirius’s expression goes hard, his eyes shining with grief and rage. “When Peter betrayed them, Lily was pregnant—she’d sent me a letter late that September to tell me. She was pregnant with the child that would have been Harry’s half-brother, and my Heir.”

Nizar does not flinch, though Severus does. “I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

Sirius shrugs. “It was a long time ago.”

“That doesn’t make it hurt less,” Nizar replies.

Sirius seems to be thinking something over. “Look, I know you don’t like me—”

“I am sorry,” Severus interrupts him. “Not for most of our acquaintance, mind, but that would have been your child. Yours and Lily’s. Truly, for that loss, you have my sympathy.”

Sirius looks at Severus as if he’s grown a second head. “I—thank you. To be honest, not many people notice what’s on the family tree. No one likes this room overly much. Dim and dank.”

“The tree will help with that,” Nizar says, trying to break the awkward tension in the room. “It’s now tied to the magical bedrock far below us. It will survive unless someone severs that tie. Something magically alive in this house that isn’t a bitter excuse for a portrait will be helpful. Oh, you might find this useful.” He takes ahold of Charlus Potter’s image and tugs on it with his fingers. It enlarges the photo, revealing the man’s own direct lineage in a smaller map of leaf-gilded portraits and lines. “You can trace anyone on this tree as far back as the magic can follow them.”

“That’s amazing. I’ve never seen it do anything interesting, really.” Black peers closer. “Those aren’t the outdated damned faces anymore. Those are proper portraits.”

Nizar glances down at the one for Potter, which shows a black-haired teenager with emerald green eyes. The poor child looks unhappy, which seems to be the case in every photo Nizar has encountered—when Potter will hold still long enough to be viewed. There is no date of death listed for Harry James Potter, which is another encouraging sign.

While Black is preoccupied by Regulus’s portrait, Nizar touches Potter’s portrait and gives it a gentle tug. Nothing happens except for James Potter and Lily Evans’ lineages lighting up to show the child’s direct familial lines.

“Is it time?” Severus asks in a voice that is stiff with discomfort.

“Yes. I was just rounding up the stragglers.” When he looks up, Black is regarding Nizar with a tight-lipped expression that isn’t quite suspicion. “Can you truly destroy Voldemort?”

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “That’s the idea. Someone should, anyway. He’s really fucking irritating.”

“I like you already, and I’ve never said that about a Slytherin before in my life,” Sirius says.

“Downstairs,” Severus reminds them testily. He and Black both manage to get down to the ground floor and descend another flight of stairs without saying an impolite word to each other. Granted, they don’t speak at all, but it’s still an improvement over practically any other interaction they’ve had for their entire lives.

The townhouse’s basement is both a kitchen and a second dining area. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling and are trying to map the walls. An ancient, resentful house-elf is lurking in the corner, scowling at those already seated and muttering about blood-traitors.

Nizar takes note of the fact that Albus Dumbledore has seated himself at one end of the table, leaving Sirius Black to take the other. It might be Dumbledore’s Order, but it still strikes Nizar as presumptuous and rude, and it’s Dumbledore who introduces him to the rest of the Order of the Phoenix.

Nymphadora the Metamorphmagus Auror is firmly of the mind that her name is *Tonks*. She favors her father in appearance, but has her mother’s dark eyes—when she’s not busy changing them to suit her mood. Tonks is also pining for Remus Lupin, who is desperately trying to pretend not to be doing the same in response. Stupid sod. That explains his earlier impression of courtship; Nizar just looked at it the wrong way.

Edward—Ted—Tonks seems to have no opinion of Nizar whatsoever, though Andromeda Black Tonks is gazing at Nizar in a way that suggests she still doesn’t know what to make of her former Common Room’s portrait no longer being a portrait. Molly and Arthur he knows already; Molly introduces Nizar to their eldest son, Bill, while Arthur mentions that their second eldest, Charlie, is part of the Order but not available that day.

Kingsley Shacklebolt is an active Auror with the Ministry’s Magical Law Enforcement division, and doesn’t seem to be a complete prick. Alastor Moody is the poor bastard who lived in a trunk for a year while a Death Eater impersonated him as the Defence instructor for the previous term, and is a paranoid, cranky fucker of a retired Auror. Like Kingsley, Tonks, and Arthur, Emmaline Vance and Hestia Jones also work for the Ministry in varying departments. Dedalus Diggle is a milliner from Diagon Alley; Mundungus Fletcher is a thief who is in desperate need of a bath.

“Now that we’re all here, a matter of minor importance before we begin.” Dumbledore looks at Nizar. “The goal of the Order of the Phoenix is simple: destroy Voldemort, and end the war his Death Eaters want to begin again on British soil. The only oath we will ever ask is that you betray no member of the Order to our enemy.”

“Easily promised,” Nizar says. “I refuse to turn any of you over to Voldemort or a Death Eater. I’d sooner kill you myself.”

Dumbledore smiles, his eyes twinkling. “Efficiency, Nizar deSlizarse?”

Nizar offers Dumbledore the same sort of bland, harmless smile the man seems to be so fond of. “Absolutely.”

“You’re really Salazar Slytherin’s brother?” Emmaline asks.

Nizar wonders if people will ever stop asking him that question. “I am, and yes, I did actually spend nearly ten centuries locked in a Preservation Charm embedded in a portrait. I don’t think I would recommend it to anyone else.”

“Which would make you...?” Diggle is lifting an inquiring eyebrow.

“Over a thousand years old,” Nizar replies. “The 1200s were interesting, and by interesting I mean most conversations centered around how much they wanted Edward of England dead, consumed, and left behind in a privy.”

“That was far more detail than I ever wanted to know about any monarch, ever, and I live in Britain,” Hestia says.

“But he was a Slytherin portrait in a Slytherin Common Room. That’s useful intelligence, considering how many Slytherins are in You-Know-Who’s ranks,” Emmaline notes.

Nizar frowns. “Please use Voldemort’s name. It’s a stupid name, but it sounds less stupid than that nonsense.”

“Emmaline has a point. You did know all the Slytherins who’d still be alive to be a pain in our backsides,” Alastor says. “And most of them were of your House, Mister Slytherin.”

“I adore how you make it sound like this must be some personal failing of mine,” Nizar returns dryly. “Perhaps those Slytherins felt they had nowhere else to go, Auror Moody. Not all of them, mind—Lucius Malfoy was a prick from the moment he entered the Common Room until the day he finally left it for good. Narcissa, though...she always struck me as being more intelligent.”

“What about Bellatrix?” Andromeda asks, a bitter smile lurking behind her eyes.

“Someone once read me a book called *Alice in Wonderland*. To use a reference from that: she’s madder than a fucking hatter,” Nizar answers. “I’d hate to think of how far down that rabbit hole she’s fallen now.”

“Far,” Black says flatly.

Lupin glances at Black. “Fortunately, Bellatrix is still in Azkaban.”

Nizar glances over and notes the expression on Severus’s face. The man looks like he’d rather be sitting on the ridge of an active volcano than be seated in this kitchen. They must be off to an excellent start, then.

He uses the lull in conversation to address Tonks. “How did you learn to become a Metamorphmagus?” he asks her.

“Learn? I was born with it,” Tonks replies, giving Nizar a puzzled look. “Rare talent. We think it must have sprung up on Dad’s side, for all his family tree claims to be Muggle for a few centuries on back.”

“Muggle is not a polite term,” Nizar grumbles under his breath. “Metamorph magic used to be a taught art.” He holds up his hand, fingers spread, and creates the webbing between them that is excellent assistance when swimming.

Tonks smiles in delight. “You weren’t born able to do that. You learned it?”

“It’s in the name. Metamorph Magician. Metamorphmagus,” Nizar replies. “I don’t know how it was forgotten, but I’m trying to figure out how to reintroduce the concept.”

“Oh, good. As if Polyjuice isn’t bad enough,” Alastor growls.

“It’s difficult magic to master,” Nizar returns. “Like an Animagus is also similarly difficult.”

“I learned it when I was fifteen,” Black says.

Nizar glances at him. “Age has nothing to do with it. It’s about dedication. You were devoted to learning it, so you did.” Nizar closes his eyes, tilting his head. “Dog?”

“The hell?” Black blurts out. “Yes, but I’ve never had anyone just *guess* before.”

“My brother was the Seer; I just have random flashes of useful insight. I said dog because of your loyalty.” Nizar has to look away from Black to speak of his brother. “You and Regulus shared that trait, though yours seems directed towards those that earn it, and his was offered to those he thought were supposed to have it.”

Black is quiet before he asks, “You knew my brother?”

“As others have latched onto, I knew every Slytherin.” Nizar finds himself fiddling with the ring on his middle finger, turning it in circles that reveal and hide the Deslizarse crest. “Some of them spoke to me; some didn’t. He was one of the few that did.”

“You asked him not to join Voldemort.” Severus’s words aren’t accusatory, but there are still days when Nizar wakes up and wants to punch his past self for not asking one of the few times it really, truly mattered.

“By the fall of 1978, I was asking everyone who would hold still for more than five minutes at a time to *not* run off and join a lunatic. At the very least, go home, wait six months—try to act like they were Slytherins instead of morons. Observe the situation from outside of school hallways.” Nizar shakes his head. “Not many thought it practical advice. Slughorn was so fucking useless.”

“I want that last statement engraved on a plaque,” Severus says.

“I sort of do, as well,” Lupin adds. Nizar understands exactly why Severus hates Slughorn, but Lupin is a surprise. “I once asked the man if something like the Wolfsbane potion would ever be possible. He was absolutely certain it could not be done,” he explains after he sees the expression on Nizar’s face.

Nizar stares at Lupin. “I—the fuck—there has been—” He puts his hands over his face and screams into them in complete fury. Then he puts his head down on the table and considers screeching into the wood.

“Does he do that often?” Mundungus asks.

Severus sounds amused. “Only when someone has said something exceedingly irritating, and in this case, it was Slughorn.”

“All the times I listened to you complain about brewing Wolfsbane potion, and never once did I think to ask you a very important detail.” Nizar decides his teeth don’t deserve the abuse of being used to gnaw on a table. “How old is that formula?”

Lupin sounds baffled. “It’s been available for eight years now.”

Nizar sits up. “We had Wolfsbane in 990! Several of our students used it!” he yells. “WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH THIS CENTURY?”

“Every time you shout about the twentieth century, it’s either very funny or very educational,” Minerva observes.

“990 AD.” Lupin frowns and then stares straight into Nizar’s eyes.

Nizar puts his hand over his face. “I am assuming that was deliberate. She had four children, and none of them were furry because lycanthropy is not a sexually transmitted illness! If it was, Godric would have had it sixteen times over!”

Tonks points at Remus. “HAH!”

“That isn’t winning!” Lupin tries to retort. He still seems bewildered, so it’s a poor effort.

“Please, can we literally discuss *anything* else?” Severus requests, scowling. “That is far more than I ever wanted to know about either of you!”

“Ah, yes. We should indeed return our attention to Voldemort’s activities,” Dumbledore says.

Nizar listens to the others throw around ideas, but he doesn’t have any himself. He can only offer that Voldemort has soul jars tying him to life. Dumbledore looks at Nizar like he allowed dinner to escape before it could be properly slaughtered, which makes Nizar wonder why he would hold back that particular information.

Nizar is *not* going to do the same. You can’t defeat an enemy if you don’t know his weaknesses, and Voldemort’s weaknesses are based in the fact that he has Horcruxes lying about that will need to be destroyed. That, of course, leads to an explanation of what

Horcruxes are in the first damned place, which almost leaves him screeching into the table again over how many of them are so completely undereducated.

“How does one identify one of these Horcruxes?” Kingsley asks.

“They are usually notable for being objects contaminated by unimaginably foul magic,” Dumbledore says, as if resigned to the necessity of explaining. He does give Nizar a warning look, but he needn’t have bothered; Nizar has no intention of telling people he’s known for an hour that Potter is suffering the indignity of being a living Horcrux. Black is the child’s father by marriage, and Nizar has no idea how he or anyone else would react.

Tonks frowns. “All right, then. How does one *destroy* a Horcrux? It sounds like they’re not built to be something you can step on to do away with.”

“Fiendfyre,” Andromeda murmurs. “Though that has its obvious disadvantages.”

“Sometimes I forget you were raised a Black,” Alastor says.

Andromeda gives him a look of cool appraisal. “And a Slytherin, Alastor.”

“Aye,” Alastor says after a moment. “That, too.”

Yet another Slytherin aside from Aberforth who would have been of age, and probably imminently capable, of acting as Slytherin’s Head of House. Nizar wonders if Dumbledore asked her, or if he jumped straight to the easy mark.

I really do not trust that man, do I? Nizar wonders, resisting the urge to look in Dumbledore’s direction. That was an exceptionally bitter thought, and those have often proven truthful, if annoying.

“Basilisk venom will also destroy a Horcrux,” Nizar says when no one else mentions it.

“Great. Where will be getting some of that, then?” Fletcher asks sarcastically. “I suppose I could steal it—oh, wait, no, stealing from an extinct creature is beyond my skill.”

“They’re not extinct, dingbat,” Nizar mutters under his breath. Beneath his collar, Kanza is hissing out faint laughter.

“There is a dead one under the school. Perhaps a basilisk fang from one that’s already deceased?” Lupin suggests.

Kanza stops laughing. Nizar clenches his jaw before he manages to stand up with a polite expression on his face. “I’m sorry, I need to get out of this house for a bit. The atmosphere of dank is stifling.”

“That’s all right. I think we’ve concluded things, and made as much progress as possible given the circumstances,” Dumbledore says, but Nizar is looking at Black.

Black nods. “He’s right. Not much else to do but cover the same ground, and I don’t blame you at all for wanting out of this pit.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Nizar replies, to Black’s bewilderment, but he doesn’t wait around for the man to try to cobble together a response.

Nizar goes up the stairs to the ground floor and exits through the front door, stepping out onto the walkway. Beyond the boundary of the Fidelius Charm, two Marked magicians are watching the house while doing a terrible job of blending in with the non-magical people in this neighborhood. They can’t see the house, but somehow, they’re aware of its existence.

Narcissa told them, maybe, Nizar thinks. *Bellatrix is more likely, though*. It’s too bad that they’re wasting their time.

Nizar Apparates to the hidden alleyway that Severus showed him on Friday and steps out into the throngs heading up and down the walkways on either side of Charing Cross Road. At least now he knows how to use the crossing lights, though a minute or two of watching people cross the street would have been a blatant hint. A few of them stop to stare at his black, silver-edged robes, but in another minute, he’s inside the magical pub and out of non-magical view.

That’s when he realizes he has no idea how to get to the alley from the pub. There aren’t exactly signs advertising—

“Come on, then, lads. Off to the alley an’ then on home!” a drunken man slurs, rising and slapping his companion so hard on the back that the other man nearly eats the tabletop.

Thank you, drunken revelers. They’re often so very useful.

Nizar follows the pair to the back of the pub and through the rear door. The one who seems less inebriated taps his wand against a specific set of bricks on the wall blocking the way, which parts to reveal a street that’s just as frozen in time as Hogsmeade.

“Progress,” Nizar mutters as he stalks down the street, ignoring the sudden murmur of interest his appearance is creating. “I’d really like to know when the magical world gave up on the idea of bloody fucking progress!”

The only shop that looks exactly the same is Ollivander’s. It has windows now, designed about three centuries ago, instead of the open shutters Nizar remembers. He doesn’t go in; the feel of that many wands is magically audible in the street.

Gringotts in Westminster was once a small, Roman-modeled building hidden from the non-magical by justifiably cautious goblins. What he finds in Diagon Alley is a massive edifice, a giant fucking monument to the horror that is consolidated magical banking in Great Britain.

“Why?” Nizar asks the goblin he meets at the marble, gold-inlaid counter. “Why just one bloody bank?”

Griphook gives him a sharp look. “For security, Master Wizard—or that would be the Ministry’s ruling, if sir cared to read it. Wizards are, after all, paranoid about money in goblin hands. They want us in a place where it’s easy to see that we’re not making off with it.”

“Everyone in this century is cracked,” Nizar says flatly. “A goblin would never do such a thing.”

“Your opinion is very rare, Master Wizard,” the goblin says.

“Please stop calling me that. It’s creepy.”

Griphook’s eyes widen a fraction. “That is the expected mode of address for a wizard unless we’re already aware of your name, sir.”

“Let me guess: that’s rolled in with the consolidated London banking decree from the Ministry, isn’t it?”

“If you say so, sir,” Griphook answers in a tone that quite obviously means *Yes*.

“Well, I refuse to be that willfully stupid. Were all of the family vaults transferred down from Inverness and Eidyn Buhr during this consolidation?” Nizar asks.

Griphook seems irritated by the question. “All the vaults in all the locations we formally conducted business in within Great Britain were transferred to London and accounted for properly in the 1600s. Have you dwelt under a rock, sir?”

“Have you?” Nizar counters, grinning. “I’m famous right now.”

“If you’re referring to the *Daily Prophet*, we prefer to get our news from *reliable* sources,” Griphook says in a dry tone.

“So do I, actually.” Nizar glances around at the magicians roaming the bank, conducting business or sharing gossip. Fortunately, none of that lot have noticed his presence. “Do you have a magical document I can sign—one that will only allow me to place my legally binding signature upon it?”

The goblin scowls and pulls out a sheet of paper. “This is a basic contract that merely confirms you are who you say you are. It tells us goblins who we should expect will want access to which vault, and nothing more. You may read it, if you wish.”

Nizar scans the contract, which is exactly as the goblin said it would be. “Do you have a quill?”

Griphook hands over a quill that seems to be magicked to provide endless ink. Excellent charm; Nizar wants one. He signs his full name and titles onto the signature line at the bottom of the page before sliding both quill and paper back to the goblin. “I would be most appreciative if you do not repeat that aloud.”

Griphook’s jaw falls open before he snaps it shut and scowls. “Well, then. No one has had dealings with your family in quite a while, sir.”

“For personal reasons. It’s nothing against your banking skills,” Nizar replies. “I did mention I was famous at the moment. You could say I fell back into existence.”

The goblin's expression is professional, polite disbelief. "Very good, sir. If you will follow me, you will wish to see the vault itself, I should think. It stands next to others of your family line, but no one has accessed these vaults since the days when we kept them elsewhere."

Nizar swallows and nods his agreement. Whatever mad quest Salazar was attempting must not have succeeded. He is going to kill Voldemort; then he is going to attempt to discover where his brother is buried. If someone placed Salazar's body on a pyre, that...that will be much more difficult to locate.

He could definitely do without the cart ride down to a much lower level of the bank. It's efficient, but unpleasant. "Do you people not believe in cushioning charms?" he asks, shaking off dizziness as he climbs out of the cart.

"They do not remain," Griphook explains. "The security features of the vaults make such charms deteriorate quickly, when it does not kill them immediately."

Griphook takes them down a cavernous hallway that hosts a line of vaults on both sides. Hugðilepuf is the first vault on the left, standing alone. The name is almost grown over with moss. "You kept her original name. Not what it became."

"That is the name the vault was created under, and that was what we goblins kept." Griphook sounds insulted that Nizar would even dare imply otherwise.

Godric's lineage has a row of vaults. Griffon's Door was Godric's own, followed by Grypusdor, the name his children used before it quickly morphed into Gryffindor. The vaults abruptly end with number seven, even though Godric has plenty of living descendants. Either the vaults are all empty, the vaults will only open to someone born with the name, or none of them are of his direct line of descent and thus ineligible. Rowena didn't keep a vault in Britain, but the family vaults for descendants of Alicia of Raven's Claw, Rowena's second-eldest child, take up most of the opposite wall. If the cleanliness of the vault door is any indication, the last one seems to still be in use.

Then there are the vaults marked with the Deslizarse seal, the family sigil before it was altered to become Hogwarts' Slytherin emblem. The first is Salazar's, which is also marked with the names of his first wife, Orellana, and his second wife, Marion. Nizar lets his fingers drift over the seal on the metal, ignoring the sting of a protective charm telling him to keep his hands off of what isn't his. He is supposed to have access to the primary family vault, but that seems to have been revoked.

The second vault is his own. Nizar walks past it to the third vault, which is inscribed with the version of the Deslizarse seal that Galiena deSlizarse crafted for her family. He can tell by the moss that, like Helga's, it hasn't been touched in centuries. The other vaults that bear the original or the revised seal are all in similar condition, and stretch down the length of the passage.

Nizar can't even read the names on any of them. "Not since the vaults were moved, you said?"

“By goblins, no. By others...a moment, please.” Griphook rests his hand on each vault in turn, cocking his head to listen. “The familial vault of the Heirs of Galiena deSlizarse, also known as Galiena Slytherin, was last accessed in 1325. The vaults belonging to other family descendants were last accessed in 1414, 1448, and 1512, respectively. I cannot tell you similarly of the descendants for your brother’s line, as they are not of your direct lineage.”

“I understand. Thank you for telling me about the others.” Nizar blinks his eyes a few times and then refuses to grieve further. He already knew that except for Riddle and the Potter child, his and Salazar’s lines are ended—well, unless the line of descent is through the Evans line, not the Potter line. He really hopes not. Riddle is enough to deal with; he doesn’t want to have to cope with Petunia Evans Dursley.

The inside of Nizar’s vault looks correct. If his faulty memory isn’t playing tricks, it was recreated to exactly resemble what was once in Inverness.

Nizar turns around in a circle in the vault. The small chests on the floor contain the money; he’d always hated the idea of a vault with gold scattered underfoot in a mess. The rest of the stone shelves hold artefacts, things he’d collected while roaming around the north of the island, England, visiting the Cymru kingdoms, the Scandinavian-held islands, and an occasional visit to the western isle. There had also been repeated visits to Rowena’s homeland in the duchy of Bavaria out of sheer mad curiosity as to what nonsense the Holy Roman Empire was going to do next in its efforts to sustain itself. He wonders if he learned old German, or just stuck with Latin and hoped for the best. That doesn’t even begin to cover the family travels to the Iberian Peninsula, Egypt, and all the kingdoms of the East.

Nizar debates for nearly a half-hour before leaving the artefacts where they are. Without re-teaching himself at least three languages, he can’t read what’s inscribed on them, and he isn’t ready to bring anything else to Hogwarts.

There are books on a shelf, each one with a twin. He must have set that duplication and updating charm on whatever he left here, as well, but it kept up with only one language, not several. He picks up two books with no names printed on their leather binding and opens the pages. Pictish and—oh, thank the blasted gods. Modern English.

He uses the same spell that created new textbooks to make duplicates of all the English copies of those books and then places them aside. He didn’t bring a bag. That was stupid—no, wait. Thanks to the elves, he has bloody infinite pockets. After putting the original updated copies back on the shelf, he shrinks the duplicated pile of books and pockets them.

“Griphook, am I getting paid by Hogwarts, by any chance?” Nizar remembers to ask.

“Of course, Master Slytherin,” Griphook replies promptly. “A professor’s pay for teaching in a full-time, full-term position at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is one thousand Galleons per term. You were also granted a starting bonus of nine hundred seventy-eight Galleons.”

Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “He paid me for hanging on the wall. Someone desperately wants to stay in my good graces.”

“I couldn’t speak on that at all, sir.”

“I’m absolutely certain your opinion would be enlightening.” Nizar is through lingering in a vault; he would rather not return for a while, either. He picks up one of the chests in its entirety, which is magicked to be lightweight no matter its contents. Griphook seals the vault after Nizar steps out, and takes him back upstairs with the neck-breaking cart ride.

Nizar has about a quarter of the chest’s contents converted into British Pound Sterling, which is paper, not coin, making it a hell of a lot easier for anyone to carry about. Paper, though; Nizar wonders how other countries handle money. Do they also use the same type of paper, or is there is a method of exchange based on its marked value to convert it back to precious metals?

The rest of the goblin coinage goes into his change purse—probably too much to be carrying on his person when he doesn’t plan on a major expense, but he’s hated not having the means to supply himself.

Griphook then takes possession of the empty chest. “Good day to you, sir.”

“Good day, Griphook.”

A store in the alley called Madam Malkin’s does magical tailoring. Nizar doesn’t lack clothes, but he doesn’t exactly have anything informal, either. Not that magicians in this era seem to understand what that means.

His trousers are fine, but it *would* be nice to own a shirt made in this century. The woman in the shop is happy to find him two black silk button-down shirts and arrange for them to be retailored to fit. The soft wool scarf, wide enough to mummify himself in, Nizar finds on his own. The weather has been too warm for cloaks but not quite pleasant enough to be comfortable without, and the scarf is a decent compromise.

He finds a cobbler who is so expensive Nizar almost starts insulting the man the moment he realizes what the bastard is charging for a pair of fucking shoes. No, he will not be using that cobbler. He refuses to—that is fucking robbery in shoe form. His boots are fine, thank you.

He does find a shop selling timepieces, which he’s wanted since the first time he viewed a pocket watch on a Slytherin student’s vest. One of the modern pieces straps onto the wrist with a black leather band wide enough to be a bracer’s cuff, and shows him different things depending on which part of the quartz face he chooses. It slides between telling him the time by the traditional twelve-hours or by twenty-four hours, the phases of the moon, a compass pointing to magnetic north, and barometric pressure in his immediate vicinity. (Why? If it’s raining in his immediate vicinity, he is already fucking well aware of it.)

He walks to the next shop, but is distracted when he sees a picture in the window. It’s a magical missing children’s poster, though the image of Harry James Potter captured in it doesn’t look happy to be the focus of that sort of attention. This photo is much larger than the tiny family tree portrait, allowing Nizar to observe a young man with disastrously messy black hair and emerald green eyes. Potter’s skin is extremely pale but still holds a suggestion

of bronze coloring, like his ancestor on the Black family tree. Potter also has a hint of a cleft chin and a snub tilt to his nose.

Severus is right; their features are very similar. At least Nizar knows that Potter is far more tolerable than Tom Riddle, who was kind enough to take after the Gaunts in appearance instead of a Deslizarse.

Nizar closes his eyes and flashes on an image of those green eyes on the face of another, pale-skinned and red-haired. She is smiling like someone who is truly happy. He's glad; someone fucking well should be in all this mess.

Lily Evans. Potter's mother. Nizar frowns, wondering if he's picking up on the sacrificial magic she left behind to protect her child. He reaches out and touches the picture on the poster, which makes the child give his hand a curious look. Nizar can feel the sense of something that was picked up by magical film development—not a captured part of the magic, merely an aspect that identifies the child had sacrificial magic attached to his person. Nizar wonders if all magical pictures capture such qualities, the way portrait artists once did, or if the magic has to be particularly strong.

There is a pet shop masquerading as an owl emporium. It has not just owls, but Kneazles, cats, rats, snakes, toads, bats, and gods know what else. Nizar does not want to go into that store and he does not want to buy an owl. He'd buy a fucking cat if cats were capable of teleporting.

There, that's a plan. Maybe he'll remake a name for himself by teaching Kneazles how to teleport so they can also be effective messengers if efficiently bribed. He likes Kneazles.

In the meantime, he still needs a damned owl. If he gets more involved in magical Britain's doings, that means correspondence.

Nizar finally chooses an owl that is black with random white feathers on his breast and on his primaries, like a breeding experiment gone awry. "Well, what do you think?" Nizar asks the owl.

The owl glares at him in disgust. That could mean anything.

Nizar finally convinces Kanza to release her grip on his neck. She glides down his sleeve to curl up in his hand. "This is Kanza. If we're to tolerate each other, you have to start with her."

The black owl turns his head almost entirely upside down as he completes a slow inspection of Nizar's basilisk. "No, she won't eat you. You're far too large. I'm more worried about you eating her." The owl looks insulted. "All right, you don't eat basilisks. That's a good start."

Kanza hisses in amusement. *"This is a good owl. He is cranky, like you."*

Nizar smiles. "I'm glad you approve. He does seem comparable to myself or Salazar of a morning, doesn't he?"

"And Minerva," Kanza adds in amusement.

Nizar purchases the owl, though the owner of the emporium seems startled that he's doing so. "That one's a cranky bastard. Been here a full year; didn't think he'd ever sell."

"Well, I'm also a cranky bastard, so he will suit," Nizar counters. "Thank you."

"Thank you, good sir. Have a pleasant afternoon."

Pleasant would be nice, Nizar thinks as he leaves the shop.

"Let's be blatant about it. Your name is now Nygell. It's corrupted Latin for 'black.'" Nizar tells the owl, who merely eyes him like he's an idiot. "Look, I believe in naming something what it is, not what it isn't. You'll simply have to cope with the indignity."

Nygell finally lets out a hoot of resignation. "Well, close enough. I have a snowy owl in a painting at home. She's lovely. You'll probably hate her."

Nizar finds himself heading back to the shop that hosted the Missing Child poster, which turns out to be a broom store. He doesn't have one of those. He's not really sure it's necessary, but he's curious enough to go inside and see what's become of brooms in the last nine centuries. He could make his own, but gods, he already has to make his own *Pensife*. He'll buy a stupid broom.

"What's this?" Nizar asks the shop keep. There is one particular broom in the store that's all but radiating magic. It's lovely, and definitely nothing standard—that is a broom meant for speed and agility. He's fond of both of those; they can keep you alive.

"That's the new Firebolt Five," the shop keep says proudly. "Firebolts are a rare broom—only a handful made per year. That's the revision from the original patent model that came out two years ago. Quite the expense! I didn't think I'd sell the original, but young Mister Potter had a benefactor! Flew it for playing Quidditch, you know. Fastest Seeker outside of the international leagues!"

"I see." Nizar bites back a smile. Severus *hated* that broom...which is not the reason why he buys the Firebolt Five. It isn't.

All right. It's a *little* bit why he buys the broom. He wants to see the expression on Severus's face. He does legitimately need a broom, though. One cannot Apparate everywhere, and he really wants to avoid the damned Floo.

"Okay. Enough is enough. I'm going home, and apparently, we're both going to fly there," Nizar says to Nygell. He makes certain that everything is secured before he casts a variant of the Invisibility Charm. "You can still see me, yes?" he asks Nygell, who hoots in derision. "I'll take that as a yes."

Nizar tests the charm by walking by a cluster of women who don't notice him at all. Excellent. He releases Nygell, discarding the cage by placing it on the ground, free to anyone who decides they have a desperate desire to own an owl cage. When Nygell takes flight, Nizar is right after him on the broom—and nearly leaves his heart on the ground in the process.

“Fuck, this thing is fast!” Nizar eases off so the broom will slow down. “The handle is long enough if you ever need a break,” he offers.

Nygell gives him another glower that says it would be an insult to his flight to accept such a thing.

“Look, the Scottish Highlands are not exactly just over the next fucking hill,” Nizar retorts. “You really are a cranky fucker. Never let pride override your sense of safety, you imbecile bird. If you fall out of the sky because you were too stupid to rest, that’s all on you.”

They fly back to Scotland that way, Nizar bickering with a bird who can’t talk, but is expressive enough to make up for it. Kanza joins in on the fun, hissing out commentary in Parseltongue about the owl, about Nizar’s utter inability to fly a broom properly, about the boring landscape, about the fact that it’s cold and he should have kept the scarf on his neck instead of packaging it up, since it would be a lovely place to sleep.

Nygell finally gives up over what used to be by the southern edge of Strathclyde, landing on the broom handle and grasping the wood firmly with his talons. “Good. Now hang on; we’re going to make up some time. I need to be home this evening so I can get enough sleep to teach a bunch of children how to not die tomorrow.”

He cheats, Apparating from outside the Anti-Apparition wards straight into his quarters from the air, which angers Nygell and makes Kanza laugh. Dobby is kind enough to take the cranky bastard of an owl up to Hogwarts’ owlery, so he’ll be in the company of those less cranky than himself. The broom is placed against the wall near the table; Nizar swaps over to a robe that hasn’t picked up a scrim of ice before going downstairs to dinner.

“You’re late,” Minerva says in dry disapproval.

Nizar smiles brightly at her. “But I’m not a white rabbit.”

“I’ve read that book, Nizar, and I’m not above hexing those who remind me of that man,” Minerva warns him.

“Did you have fun wandering about in London?” Severus asks after he sits down.

“Certainly. It gave me time to muse on politics,” Nizar replies.

Severus pauses mid-motion. “Politics,” he repeats, like it’s a foul word.

“Yes, such politics as wondering why Albus Dumbledore declared that everyone in the Order was present in that meeting today, when I know for certain at least four people aside from Charlie Weasley were not,” Nizar says in a low voice.

“Ah. Those politics,” Severus mutters.

“Not my favorite kind.”

Severus glances at him, a grim sort of watchfulness in his eyes. “Nor mine.”

Declaration

Chapter Summary

“What the hell just *happened*?”

London and that first Order meeting sets a pattern that Nizar rather likes. With very few exceptions, he and Severus spend their evenings after student curfew together, either in Nizar’s quarters upstairs or in Severus’s home in the dungeons. Severus still isn’t sleeping well, but Nizar has always courted insomnia, so it works out well enough. There are mornings or late nights when Nizar warns Severus about the Dark Mark before Severus becomes aware of it, but blood magic meant to create pain has always been loud to him. It being Voldemort’s blood magic just makes it far more obvious.

Nizar’s students are finally, finally progressing in a way that he finds satisfying. The paper is quoting Fudge’s absolute terror of “the army that Hogwarts is raising for unknown purposes.” He’d snipped that article from the *Daily Prophet*, quote highlighted, and stuck it to his office wall. The author of the article meandered back and forth, not certain if it was Dumbledore or the infamous Slytherin who is supposed to be Fudge’s mortal enemy.

Miss Weasley also comes to see him Wednesday morning, citing an owl that arrived from her parents. “So, you, uh...met my Mum and Dad,” she says. Out of the corner of his eye, Nizar can see Ron Weasley lingering with the twins, eavesdropping in a way that is beyond obvious. The twins are aware of their obviousness and chose it deliberately; Ron is not.

“I did, yes,” Nizar answers Miss Weasley. “I also met their parlor chair.”

Miss Weasley tries not to smile, but her eyes are overbright with stifled laughter. “Mum might have mentioned three more apologies for that, Professor. They, uh...you told them that I was doing well.”

“I did, and I meant it. I’ve finally convinced that stupid boggart that I’m not going to torture it with Miss Lovegood any longer. If you have a free period at four o’clock any day this week or next, I’ll let you prove it.”

She seems surprised, and then her eyes narrow. “Thursday at four. Is that okay, Professor?”

Nizar smiles. Tomorrow. Miss Weasley isn’t wasting any time at all. “That’s fine.”

That morning’s double isn’t fun for any of them. Nizar is continuing the Death Eater’s instruction regarding throwing off the Tempero Curse, but at least he’s able to give his students more blasted information. (He spends every class period reminding himself that the current accepted term is Imperius, even if it is a *stupid* term.)

Nizar did what the Death Eater neglected, teaching the first lessons in mind magic, which gives the Gryffindor-Slytherin class a fighting chance. By the end of the two-hour set, Miss Granger has it, to his pleasure, as does Miss Shafiq, Longbottom, Zabini, Miss Bulstrode, and Miss Greengrass.

“How come the girls are better at this than the boys?” Nott asks, scowling. “Shouldn’t we be better at this than they are?”

Nizar gives the young man a flat stare. “Mister Nott, once the words you have just spoken are repeated throughout this school, you’ll be fortunate if you ever have a date again in your entire life.”

“Seriously,” Miss Parkinson mutters, glaring at Nott. “If you were paying any attention at all, ever, you’d know exactly why.”

“Miss Parkinson, you’re also very close. I expect to see a vast improvement next Wednesday,” Nizar tells her, and she smiles. “Mister Thomas and Mister Vaisey—you are, also. The others need to focus on what I’ve told you and be prepared for next week.”

Now that Nizar has spent nearly six weeks catching up the lower years on what they should already know, he’s started to introduce the fourth-years to the Patronus Charm. They don’t have to worry about fending off a Dementor-boggart until next term, so most of them are enjoying the challenge.

Miss Lovegood already has an Occamy Patronus flittering around her head when she enters the classroom for Nizar’s next double-set with the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. “I don’t think I need to be concerned with your progress, do I?” Nizar asks her, smiling.

She gives him a dreamy look. “No, Professor. I’m quite pleased with it. She’s lovely.”

“She is,” Nizar says, and gestures at her wand. “You’ll need to put away your Patronus for now. You can use it to distract the others once everyone can produce the charm.”

“Yes, sir,” Miss Lovegood replies happily. She dismisses her Patronus with a murmured instruction instead of her wand. Nizar loves elemental magicians. He’s still trying to decide how to revamp Miss Lovegood’s instruction for the latter half of the term to suit her talents.

By the end of the period, no one else has a corporeal Patronus, but Miss Smith of Ravenclaw is close. “Good job, all of you, even if you’re discouraged. If it were an easy spell, you’d be casting the Patronus Charm in first year.”

The third-years and the first-years afterwards are still easier, mostly because Nizar is not telling either group that they’re being pushed into fourth-year and second-year spellwork. They’re more than ready, but the moment some children hear that they’re advancing ahead of schedule, they freeze up, and then it’s torture on both sides trying to convince them otherwise. Nizar prefers to skip that step, thanks.

On Thursday morning, Goldstein, Padma Patil, Miss Bones, Miss Jones, and Macmillan are his successes in fighting off Tempero. Mister Boot, Miss Brocklehurst, and Miss Thatcher are

close, and he gives the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff class of fifth-years the same instructions their Slytherin-Gryffindor counterparts received.

His fourth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors have better luck in attaining more silvery forms closer to corporeal Patroni, even if it seems to be based on competition. That's an improvement over outright war, so Nizar uses it to everyone's advantage. Miss Weasley, Mister Loonat, and Miss Meads all have a corporeal Patronus at the end of the double period—a Granian, an elephant from the East, and a tiny little monkey that keeps trying to steal everything in the classroom despite the fact that it can't touch anything.

Miss Weasley returns at four that afternoon, visibly nervous. "I'm ready to see the, er, boggart, sir," she says, glancing at the locked cabinet when the boggart inside starts banging on the walls.

Nizar waits for her to take a position and nod to say she's ready. Then he unlocks the cabinet and steps back.

"*Riddikulus!*"

When the boggart shrieks, retreats, and hides in the cabinet again, Miss Weasley turns to him. "How did I do, Professor?"

Nizar glances at her. "Could you do that a second time?"

Miss Weasley thinks about it. "I don't see why not."

Nizar gets out his wand and casts his Patronus. "Fred, find Colin Creevy, and tell him to bring his camera to the Defence classroom."

Fred arrives, out of breath, all but towing poor Creevy behind him. George nearly plows into them from behind when Creevy stops short in the doorway. "I brought the documentarian!" Fred announces. "My only requested compensation is that I get to witness this."

"I kept him from escaping!" George adds, and Miss Weasley begins to smile.

"Excellent. Mister Creevy, I have an assignment for you."

Swearing them all to secrecy over the matter is more difficult—it's the bloody Weasleys—but once Nizar points out the danger, all four students are more than willing to keep their mouths shut. The twins are especially enthused by the idea that the nature of Ginevra's boggart will eventually become known in a way that will definitely irritate their enemy.

Nizar spends all of Friday morning grading the essays that are starting to be handed in as the winter holiday approaches. They only have one more week before the assignments are considered late, and he's a complete bastard who will only hand out half-credit if they can't turn in an essay on time when they had two months to write it.

Well, he does make allowances for overnights in the hospital wing or other emergencies, but *I only started it yesterday!* has never once been acceptable, even when he wasn't required to put a letter grade on them.

By the time Nizar realizes he skipped lunch, his classroom is being invaded by the Weasley twins. “Bargaining time!” Fred calls out, grinning. “Otherwise known as your turn to help us!”

“All right, but you’re showing off your notoriety while I eat lunch.” Nizar receives a tray from an elf before he even has the chance to ask for it. “Cheeky. Buggers.”

“Starting with the prank line first, the harmless nonsense,” George says.

“Genuinely harmless,” Fred adds. “Unless you point out something we haven’t thought of, in which case we raise the age limit for sale.”

“Already have a place picked out, do you?” Nizar asks, watching as the twins start unloading one of four bags.

“Negotiating the rent for it over winter break,” George tells him proudly. “Lee Jordan and Verity Smith are in on it. Verity’s a sure thing as our first employee, but Lee is iffy—he still wants to go for professional Quidditch commentating.”

“He does have the reputation to get picked up, but there has to be an opening first,” Fred says. “Oh, you’ve missed every single Quidditch match this year. If you miss the one tomorrow morning, we’ll be accusing you of having no school pride, Professor.”

“I’ve been sort of distracted by learning how to function in this century,” Nizar says. “Who’s playing?”

“Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw. Can’t imagine who our money might be on to win the game.”

Fred rolls his eyes at George. “Our sister is Seeker this year. Much as we miss Harry, Ginny is damned good, Your Leadership, sir.”

The twins have an unnamed prototype hairbrush charmed with the same spell they used on Severus’s hair. Nizar reminds himself that in the twins’ mind, such an item makes perfect sense. They also have a newly dubbed Headless Hat that they’re blaming Nizar for, as he’s the one who introduced the concept of the Invisibility Charm. “Yes, but I didn’t tell you the incantation!”

George gives Nizar an innocent look. “Well, no, but it’s not all that hard to figure out from the context, now, is it?”

“Just don’t use the charm itself in Hogwarts.”

The candies are far less daunting, as they wear off in one to three minutes. Nizar turns down the opportunity to be a fucking canary.

“Not without a liability waiver,” Nizar says of their proud creation, U-No-Poo. “You can physically hurt people with something like that.”

“He’s learning twentieth century words!” Fred says while George takes notes. “Guess we’re raising the age limit on that one.”

“I’m learning twentieth century legalese because your Ministry is ridiculous,” Nizar counters. “Pay one of the seventh-year Slytherins to write up a contract on that. They’re good at closing loopholes.”

“We keep running out of Ten-Second Pimple Vanisher,” George says while Nizar eyes the bottle in question. “Took quite a bit of testing to get that one right, but it does exactly what it says, no side-effects.”

“Same with our Bruise Removal Paste.” Fred hands over a container with a screw-on lid.

Nizar opens it and catches an immediate whiff of arnica root. “Oh, good choice. Chamomile and comfrey?”

“Black tea and a few other secret ingredients, too,” George answers. “You can keep that one. Us seventh-years are getting better in class, and so are a few sneaky younger-year students. You might need it. That one’s more potent than anything we’ve ever encountered in a potions book.”

The range of quills are interesting; Nizar wants about a dozen of the Self-inking Quills. (“Unlike everyone else’s, you can adjust the charm on ours so the ink will be any color, any time you like.”) The Smart Answer Quills might as well bear Fred and George’s names directly. The Spell-checking Quill is a good bit of magic, even though the twins confess they can only make them work for two months before the spell breaks down. (“Blame the modern English language,” Nizar tells them in complete honesty.) The Self-writing Quill is their pride of the bunch, as they’ve made the magic last a full year, when others last only months.

Their gigantic flood they’re calling Portable Swamp is intriguing enough that Nizar almost asks them to release one in the corridor just to see the results, but Argus Filch already can’t stand his existence. There are the weather charms which provide personal rain, snow, or sun to whoever uncaps the bottle. Then there are the fireworks which multiply if someone tries to Vanish them, indoor and outdoor varieties. Nizar tells them that if they can learn to harness the tornado in a bottle, they should weaponize it.

“You do realize you could show all of this to Professor Flitwick and he would pass you for the rest of the year, right?”

The twins glance at each other. “You know...”

“We hadn’t thought of any of this in terms of grades,” Fred continues, one eyebrow raised.

“We’re idiots,” George finishes, and puts his head down on Nizar’s desk.

“That blemish remover and the bruise paste would probably get Professor Snape’s attention in a way that doesn’t involve him giving you every detention in existence, too,” Nizar points out. “Do you have anything else that qualifies as a potion?”

George and Fred proudly put a row of pink and purple bottles in a row on his desk, proclaiming every type, despite the differences in application, to be love potions.

“I see.” Nizar crosses his arms. “Tell me the difference between Tempero—*Imperio*—and a love potion.”

“One’s an Unforgivable,” George says at once, but he’s trading glances with Fred.

“And?” Nizar sighs when neither of them say anything. “And thus you learn why June is devoted to ethics. There isn’t a difference aside from the Ministry legally naming the Imperius Curse to be an Unforgivable, punishable with time in prison. That’s it. I will end your existences if I ever catch you peddling this shit. Do you understand me?”

“We’ve already got orders in for some of this,” George says, helping Fred put those bottles away. “I don’t know what we’ll tell people.”

“You come up with a different arrangement in a similar vein.” Nizar gestures at the bruise paste and their blemish remover. “Gather up anything you have of that nature and go introduce Professor Snape to part of your venture...and ask him about Spiritum Veritatis.”

“Why?” Fred asks, at the same time as George snaps his fingers.

“I’ve seen that in Hogsmeade! I thought it was brilliant and wanted to approach the maker, but the shop wouldn’t tell me who it was.” George looks gleeful. “Slytherins like trade, right?”

“Yes, they do, so be prepared to give up your recipe for the bruise balm for personal use,” Nizar says. “Is there anything else?”

The first answer to that question is something called Skiving Snackboxes, which started turning a profit during Dolores Umbridge’s first week of teaching. Nizar investigates its contents, suggests they show it to Minerva McGonagall *after* they graduate, and then says, “Consider adding a disclaimer on the box: ‘Some teachers are more gullible than others.’ If I performed a healing spell on someone’s bleeding nose and it didn’t work, they’d be caught out.”

“Yes, but who would skive off from your classes?” Fred asks in complete seriousness. “You’re not boring!”

“Some people simply don’t wish to learn. Ever.” Those same people, Nizar has often found, usually don’t live very long.

Nizar stares at their Patented Daydream Charm after the twins explain it. “How many of these can you make in a month’s time?”

“Plenty,” George answers after he and Fred confer in silence. “Why?”

Nizar points at the charm, which they’ve contained to a candy form. “Because one of the first steps towards learning the part of mind magic you call Occlumency is knowing how to focus your thoughts internally. It progresses beyond that, of course, but some magicians are absolute rubbish at any form of internal concentration that involves constant visualization. This might be an excellent way to start.”

“Wicked,” Fred declares. “We need to get a test group together.”

“Yes, and it’s called next Tuesday at eight o’clock in the morning,” Nizar says. “I’m running out of time for some of you to learn certain life-saving skills. Bring twelve doses of that to class. If it works, you’re going to directly assist me with the fifth- and sixth-years instead of just the younger students.”

The last set of items prove how serious the twins are about their desire to fight against Voldemort and his army of twits. They have attack fireworks in addition to their normal ones (“Still harmless, but a damned good distraction.”); Extendable Ears for eavesdropping, with another type capable of cutting through privacy spells meant for Dumbledore’s Order members; instant stubble and beard growth concoctions, which last for an hour and are useful for those who need to hide in a hurry; a Decoy Detonator (“Runs off from you and creates chaos, good distraction. Oh, and it multiplies if you try to Vanish it.”) that Nizar wants and he doesn’t care if he has to pay for it or not. They also have a line of clothing with *Protego* embedded in the fabric, capable of repelling light to moderate jinxes, hexes, and curses.

“You’re brilliant, terrifying, and you’re going to be both infamous and famous,” Nizar says. “Pack up and go find something else to do with the rest of your afternoon.”

The twins are back at 5:45. Fred is beaming so hard Nizar worries he might explode. “We have a deal for the sale of Spiritum Veritatis.”

“An *exclusive* deal,” George puts in, grinning. “With an order put in to make certain we don’t disappoint our Valentine’s Day clientele.”

“What did you do, lie in wait outside the Potions classroom and waylay that man in the dungeon?” Nizar asks, amused.

George nods. “Well...”

“Duh, Professor,” Fred says. “See you at dinner!”

Nizar gets up and shuts the classroom door to signal that he isn’t going to be available. He’s no sooner turned around than Severus Apparates into the room. “Oh, hello.”

“What the hell just *happened*?” Severus asks in disbelief, and Nizar bursts out laughing.

* * * *

Severus is in his office that evening when he becomes aware of an unfamiliar sound. He lifts his head, curious, then gives up and goes to open his door when the sound doesn’t become any clearer. Even then, it takes him a moment to recognize the dual hornpipe of the alboka Nizar purchased in Hogsmeade.

Years of experience helps him to track the sound to its source, when otherwise the notes might otherwise be followed in any direction. He takes the stairs to the fifth floor, where he finds a number of students starting to cluster to listen.

Nizar is sitting in the frame of one of the large, shuttered windows, eyes closed. He is either not aware of them, or very good at pretending to ignore them all. Severus doesn't recognize the tune, but it has a similar mournful quality to what Nizar played in the music shop while professing to be out of practice.

Out of practice, his entire backside. There is enough emotive strength behind those notes that the hair on Severus's arm and the back of his neck is trying to stand on end.

"Now what's all this racket?" Argus Filch yells. The students part like water to allow Filch to get through. "What's that bleedin' noise?"

Argus Filch, I might actually contemplate killing you, Severus thinks in annoyance.

Nizar stops playing abruptly. "Noise?" He hops down from the window and approaches Filch, who takes two steps back in surprise before he remembers to stop. Nizar's expression is like the sudden descent of a blizzard, an icy rage that a wiser man would be running from. "Did I hear you correctly? Did you refer to one of my dearest friends' favorite songs as *racket* and *noise*?"

"Well—I didn't know it was you, Professor Slytherin," Filch replies, too startled by Nizar's sudden vehemence to remember to sound snide, as he usually does when referring to Hogwarts' Defence instructor. "Students aren't allowed to be making that kind of racket in the halls!"

"*Racket*," Nizar repeats, the sound almost inaudible from between his clenched teeth. "Since when is the playing of a musical instrument banned in Hogwarts?"

Filch scowls. "It's not banned! It's just not meant for the halls!"

"And where—*where*—in the school's rules and guidelines does it say that a musical instrument is not meant to be played in a public space within this school?" Nizar asks in a cold voice.

"It isn't." Severus glances over, not surprised that it's Granger who has an immediate answer.

"No, it's actually not," Miss Greenwood says, backing up Granger. "But no one really...dares to."

"You've been enforcing a rule that doesn't exist, then?" Nizar glares at Filch. "Go. Away."

"Now, see here—"

"I. Don't. Care." Nizar points at the stairwell. "You do not get to make up your own rules and restrictions to suit your tastes, or lack thereof."

“Now, Professor, it’s to keep the noise levels down!” Filch protests. “This is a school, isn’t it?”

“I assure you, you will not hear such *noise* from me again,” Nizar says in a deadly whisper. “Depart from my sight, or I will *make* you, and I will not use the stairs to do so.”

Severus leans against the wall, out of Filch’s line of sight, as Filch draws himself up to look for supporters. “Come along, Mrs. Norris,” Filch finally says. “Guess we’ll be moving on to my office.”

After Filch leaves, Nizar politely moves out of the small crowd of students and goes the opposite way, up the stairs to the seventh floor. The moment both he and Filch are gone, Miss Applebee bursts out with, “Dammit, it’s not fair!”

“You know what’s going to happen.” Granger has a furious expression on her face. “He’s ever so touchy about the Founders.”

“We’re never going to hear anything like that again. Not unless someone comes up with some seriously bright ideas,” Miss Bainbridge mutters.

Fred and George Weasley glance at each other. “All in favor of making Argus Filch’s life a living hell for the rest of the school term?” George asks. “Say ‘aye.’”

“Aye,” comes from a number of mouths, representing all four different Houses. Granger’s and Parangyo’s are especially vicious-sounding.

“Motion carries,” Fred says, but he doesn’t look like a young man ready to carry out mischief. He looks like a man preparing to go to war.

Severus slips away before the students realize there has been a teacher witnessing their plotted revenge. He’s proud of them, but he’s also concerned about Nizar. He’s never seen Nizar’s temper slip so badly, not even during that first heated conversation in the newly rediscovered Defence classroom. He ducks into an empty storeroom and Apparates upstairs, landing next to the door for Nizar’s office. The *S* is already flipped into position, so he knocks.

“Come in.”

Severus frowns at the flat-sounding quality to Nizar’s voice and pushes open the door. “Nizar?”

“Over here.” Nizar is sitting on his own sofa, regarding the fire in the fireplace with a vacant stare. “What did you need?”

“To see you,” Severus replies. “I thought you were going to murder Argus Filch.”

“You saw that, hmm?” Nizar pats the sofa next to him. “No. No point to it.”

Severus sits down, glances into the fire, and can just make out the curve of a bone horn. “Nizar.”

“You are not the only person in this castle with an atrocious temper, Severus Snape.”

Severus pulls Nizar up against him. “I wish you hadn’t.”

“Yes, well...it’s done. I have to stop—I can’t keep reaching for the past.” Nizar lets out a ragged sigh. “It’s gone, and it isn’t coming back.”

Severus has no idea what to say to that. Sympathy in his life has usually come from very few sources, Nizar being one of them, but offering it in return is a difficult task. “If it cheers you, there are many students who have vowed to make Argus’s life very interesting for the rest of the school term.”

Nizar is silent for a moment. Then he growls, “I don’t feel sorry for him at all.”

“Now those are the words of a vengeful Slytherin.”

* * * *

Saturday morning brings Quidditch with it. Severus finds Nizar is sitting in the staff section, wrapped in a cloak against the chill. “Minerva has a betting pool on everything within this school, doesn’t she?”

Severus nods as he sits down. “You adjust. Did you place a wager?”

“I’m really not that comfortable betting on my own students,” Nizar says. “Besides, I gambled on Minerva decking Pomona Sprout if Ravenclaw takes the game.”

“Not Filius?” Severus asks.

“No, he’s far too polite about all of this. Sprout is incorrigible,” Nizar replies.

Severus nods in agreement. “If it weren’t for the fact that Gryffindor is going to win, I’d participate in that bet.”

Nizar glances at him. “You’re that certain?”

“Even without Potter’s presence as team Seeker, the Gryffindor lineup is very, very good—they have been since 1991,” Severus says, “and you’ll tell absolutely no one that I said that.”

Nizar smiles. “Not a soul.”

“First modern Quidditch game?” Filius squeaks at Nizar when the Ravenclaws have climbed their way up by one hundred points.

“It is.” Nizar watches the flyers with his chin resting on his gloved hands. “That broom is complete shit, but Gryffindor’s Seeker has the ability to go professional—professional

Quidditch really is a thing, right? That wasn't a jest?"

"It truly is a thing," Severus confirms. "They're all lunatics."

"What about my Seeker?" Filius asks.

Nizar frowns. "Not Miss Chang—not flying in Seeker position, at least. That's a decision that strikes me as being made because there was no one else who would suit, not what she was best at."

Filius doesn't find the observation to be insulting. "What would you suggest? There was no one this year, but that could change next year!"

"She's fast enough, but given her performance in class? Beater," Nizar replies. "She has a good swing and good aim and—wow, Fred, that was you almost flying into the goal posts."

"Is he drunk?" Pomona asks, starting to frown.

"No." Nizar scowls. "Someone's hexing him."

"I wonder who the twins angered this time," Bathsheda wonders.

Nizar glares at her. "I think that's not exactly the point."

"Cheating *is* a time-honored tradition among Slytherins," Septima says coolly.

Severus rolls his eyes, but Nizar takes offence. He just does it with a grace that Severus would never be able to manage. "Dear Septima. That," he points at Fred, who is still trying to steer a broom that wants to fly backwards, "is not cheating. That is endangering someone's life. I'd hope the difference would be easier to recognize among grown adults than it is among small children."

Severus's teeth vibrate when the magic in the area suddenly spikes in intensity. Fred's broom immediately begins behaving itself. "What did you just do?"

"I cut off the students from being able to cast spells on the Quidditch pitch for the duration of this game, House by House," Nizar answers. "There is a Ravenclaw in the stands with a grudge, Filius."

"Botheration," Filius mutters. "Thank you for letting me know. I'll look into the matter when the game ends."

Gryffindor takes the game, but only just, when Weasley gets to the Snitch first. "Despite that shit broom, even. Professional flyer," Nizar says again.

"Shut up about the game so that we can go back inside where it is civilized and *warm*," Severus hisses.

"How did you do that?" Pomona asks, blocking their escape route to question Nizar. "Cutting off student access to magic like that. That's unnatural!"

Nizar stares at Pomona in complete bafflement. “Unnatural? This is a *school for magic*. Therefore, sometimes issues of safety take precedence. If you’d let me tie you into your House’s corner of the magic properly, you would understand this at once.”

“And I still say that’s rubbish!”

Nizar sighs. “If you’re not going to accept honest answers, please get out of my way. I feel this sudden need to jump into the Black Lake.”

“You’re not actually going to jump into the fucking lake, are you?” Severus asks on their way back to the castle.

“I’m considering it. I’m really, really angry right now about how—how fucking *callous* some of these teachers are when it comes to the lives of others!” Nizar seethes. “Why are these people teaching here if they do not fucking *care*?”

“You do realize that these same teachers are usually accusing me of what you’re saying now.”

“You. Care.” Nizar grinds his teeth. “You do not put a beaming fucking smile on your face to do so, because you understand that it’s not necessary! Patting someone on the head doesn’t mean you give a fuck!”

Severus gives him a surprised look. “You’re truly bothered by this.”

“Of course I am! It’s my job, Severus! *Protectoris ex Britanni*—” Nizar breaks off and squeezes the bridge of his nose. “Fuck! I almost had it.”

“Not merely a single word title, then.” Severus frowns. “Are you all right?”

“No, now I’m angry, *and* I have a headache.” Nizar drops his hand. “Protector of the Britons makes no damned sense at all.”

“Why not?”

“Because that was Myrddin’s fucking title!” Nizar bursts out, making Severus glad that there are no students within earshot. Nizar takes his own dictum about not swearing in front of those who are underage quite seriously.

“Nizar: that probably means you’re merely recalling his instead of your own,” Severus suggests.

Nizar frowns. “I really hope you’re right about that.”

* * * *

Severus awakens on Sunday morning at his usual time, rolls over, and finds a scrap of paper on the empty pillow next to him. He unfolds it and frowns at the note, trying to read it by the light of one lit wall sconce. Last night had been devoted to Voldemort—again. He hadn't been able to sleep in the darkness, but the room had been too bright otherwise.

No, I really don't sleep that well, Nizar writes, answering Severus's grumbling thought. *Send this back to me when you're coherent enough for breakfast.*

He gets up, dresses in only a shirt and trousers, and spends a few minutes in the bathroom trying to wake up and be somewhat presentable. Then he finds a quill, writes a response, and sends the paper back to Nizar. He changes his mind and goes back to his bedroom for socks when the chill of the dungeons starts leeching into his bare feet. One would think he would have developed thicker skin after all of these years in the Scottish Highlands, but he's never been able to forget how much bloody warmer it is in the south.

Nizar arrives at the same time as breakfast. Unlike Severus, he dressed for the day. "Good morning!"

"Please reserve the enthusiasm for morning until *after* caffeine."

"Rough night?" Nizar asks, stepping aside so the elves can deliver breakfast.

Severus gives Filky a curt nod so that she'll leave. "Guess."

Nizar picks up a teacup, pours out tea so black it looks lethal, and places it into Severus's hands. "Voldemort."

"Him," Severus agrees, and starts drinking tea that tastes as bitter as it appears. "He is *planning* something, and he is enjoying wasting my time while he does so. I didn't get back until very late last night."

"Because he doesn't want you to tell me, either intentionally or by accident." Nizar picks up a scone before settling into a chair.

"At this juncture, I still believe he fears you would simply take the information, not that I would let it slip." Severus blinks a few times and pours a second cup of tea. "Good morning."

Nizar smiles, unoffended. "It is, actually. I'd like to reassure you that I'm not concerned about Voldemort."

Severus tries not to let that statement kill what little appetite he has. "*I am.*"

Nizar investigates the jam pot, which is full of raspberry preserves. "You can know and understand how to manipulate other people, either by terror or by making them love you, and still be a complete fucking moron."

"You don't think he's intelligent?"

"Oh, he is," Nizar admits, making a face over a bite of scone and jam. "Why can I taste nothing but sugar? Why does no one know how to make preserves anymore without crafting

something you could coat a wall with, and then use that to stick people to the wall?"

"Didn't they use honey one thousand years ago?" Severus asks, relieved. Albus treats his evenings with Voldemort, or the day after, as if it's a terrible burden. It is, but Severus is in no mood to be reminded of that fact when he's just escaped from needing to deal with it. Nizar treats the next day as if everything is still normal—which it is.

"Yes, but we didn't need that bloody much of it." Nizar breaks off the part of the scone butchered by jam and eats the rest. "Do you know what today is?"

Severus gives him a flat look. "Sunday."

"Yes, but what is the date?" Nizar presses.

He rolls his eyes. "The seventeenth."

"Which is?"

Severus frowns. "December. Do you need a calendar so that I'm not pressed into service?"

"It's the first day of Hanukah, you dingbat," Nizar tells him, smiling.

Severus puts down his tea, reaching over to grab the calendar from his desk. "You're right. So it is."

"How long has it been since you paid attention?" Nizar asks.

He puts the calendar back. "1983. Then my mother died that summer, and there was no one left who knew, or cared. Well, possibly you might have," Severus adds. "But I never mentioned it."

"No. You didn't." Nizar gives him an innocent look. "I hope you don't mind me using it as an excuse to plot."

"I highly doubt you needed any sort of excuse at all," Severus replies. "Can I finish breakfast before I discover the result of this plot?"

"Results, plural," Nizar corrects, pouring tea. "Oh, wow," he says after the first sip. "It's like inhaling liquid gunpowder."

"All right," Severus says, giving in to the inevitable after his third cup of tea and enough food to ensure he doesn't strangle anyone before lunch. "Do your worst."

He might as well have thrown cold water over the proceedings. "It might very well be," Nizar murmurs under his breath. "I've never actually done this before."

"Nizar—"

Nizar hands over an envelope, interrupting him. "You should open that. The picture on top will be a bit of a shock, but you'll like the one underneath."

Severus appreciates the warning when he realizes that the first photograph is a full color wizarding snapshot of a very young Tom Marvolo Riddle. He pulls out the second photograph and nearly falls off of his chair laughing.

“Ginevra Weasley’s boggart?” he asks, trying to breathe through fits of inconvenient laughter.

“That would be it, yes.” Nizar has his chin propped up on his hand, watching Severus recover himself.

Severus tucks both pictures back into the envelope. It is going to take very careful mental arrangement of his shielding and his memories to hide that. “Ginevra dressed up her boggart as Gilderoy Lockhart. I’m impressed that someone finally found a use for that buffoon.”

“I thought the twins were going to expire of laughter when they saw her charm at work. That poor, traumatized boggart. First Miss Lovegood scares it into hiding for over a week, and now three gingers think it’s too funny to scare anything.”

“Thank you,” Severus says, putting the envelope into one of the writing desk’s cubbyholes. “The moment he’s dead, I’m framing that.” He hesitates as something else occurs to him. “That might put the Weasleys and their photographer in danger.”

“Sworn to secrecy. The twins are going to be learning Occlumency, and understand that I’m not going to let them rush out and fight Death Eaters until they’ve mastered it.” Nizar hands him two quills. “From the twins. Self-inking quills that last a year, charmed to become any color needed. I’m told they’re already set to red.”

“How observant of them.” Severus isn’t sure how to cope with the idea of the twins giving him anything that doesn’t involve migraines. He’s still not certain what to make of a world in which Fred and George Weasley make any sense at all. A quick test proves that the ink is, indeed, the exact shade of red he prefers. “What charm did they set it to?”

“*Exsisto aurum*,” Nizar suggests. Severus tries it and leaves a swath of shining gold across the paper.

“*Exsisto coccineus*,” Severus mutters, and the quill’s ink returns to scarlet again. “Useful.”

“Their other gift is the absolutely solemn promise that no product of theirs except the quills will ever work in the Potions classroom,” Nizar says. “They like being alive.”

“How grateful should I be for that promise?” Severus asks.

Nizar’s expression becomes mindful of someone who has witnessed the end of sanity and is still trying to decide on a reaction. “Very.”

“You know, Hanukkah is eight days. You’ve already crossed over into the third day before I’ve had the chance to realize it’s morning yet.”

“And I’m also supposed to wait until after dark, but our schedules are really...not.” Nizar reaches into his robe pocket and pulls out a wrapped package that looks like several decks of Muggle playing cards stacked together. He hands it to Severus and then rests his chin on his

hands again. “Those who practice Divination will tell you that unless you have some spark, some talent for Sight, you can understand the mechanics, but the mechanics are all you’ll ever know. That hasn’t been my experience.”

Severus hesitates before he unties the string holding the silk-wrapped bundle closed. “Oh?”

“It’s my experience that those who Divine look to a very narrow set of tools. Of course, then anyone who cannot use those tools is judged to not have the talent for it. I hold a mastery in mind magic, so my Sight manifests in the ways I’ve told you of. However, that’s what suited me. Open it.”

Severus gives Nizar a curious look, removing the wrapping to reveal a deck of cards. “Tarot?” he asks in bemusement, recognizing the deck by the classic Victorian pattern on the back.

“It’s the sort of deck that would make Trelawney and her cohorts screech.” Nizar gestures at him to turn the deck over.

“Potions ingredients.” Severus sorts through the deck quickly and sees no numbers or Arcana found in Divination’s traditional ideas of the tarot. The drawings are finely detailed and colored in an exact match of each plant—magical and non-magical—along with feathers, insects, magical creatures, stones, and...

“Dragon’s Breath of Life,” Severus whispers, finding the card at the end of the deck. He’s only ever seen crude, aged drawings of the plant. This is as crisp and pristine as it’s possible to get without finding the extinct plant in real life. The flowers are literally the color of dragon flame; the leaves and stem are the scales of the misnamed Welsh Green Dragon, imported from the south when the last of the Welsh Reds were driven into extinction.

Dragon’s Breath of Life: so named because it was rumored to have the ability to call spirits back to their bodies, and to bring the dead back to life. Severus thinks that to be myth, but that the plant had true and legendary powers of restoration isn’t in doubt at all.

“I’ve never seen a deck like this.”

“And you won’t. It’s unique. I drew it.”

Severus looks up in surprise. “I didn’t know you were an artist.”

Nizar smiles. “I’m not. I can document very well, but I’m not an artist. Coloring the images properly is a trick Helga taught me when I was still trying to learn the plants in this area.”

“And you think I can use this.”

“I believe you can, actually. You would also be considered to hold a mastery in mind magic, Severus, which is an important foundation stone of *all* your abilities. That being said, most Divination I’ve seen taught in this castle is showmanship and nonsense. The only thing necessary is an understanding of your tool, which is why I chose what you know best.” Nizar points at the deck. “All you need is to have a question in mind, and then draw cards only by

prime numbers. More cards will gain you clearer answers, but too many will give you too much information to sort through. Even the manner in which the cards are laid out is rubbish. Choose by feel.”

“This is ridiculous,” Severus mutters. Fine, he’ll do it, if only to prove that he doesn’t have a speck of talent for bloody Divination. He chooses five cards from the deck while holding it facedown. His frown turns to a scowl as he does, indeed, feel a difference from one card to the next. Bugger all.

He grits his teeth and draws until the count hits eleven, and they’re all the same theme: African violet, willow, sandalwood, ivy, mandrake, heliotrope, sagebrush, frankincense, agrimony, myrrh, and peony.

Nizar watches the cards pile up on the table in bewilderment. “What the fuck did you ask?”

“Every. Single. Fucking. Card,” Severus growls. “I believe you now. I asked about Potter. Where is Harry James Potter?”

Nizar’s eyebrows go up. “Taken for protection, purification, and healing. Every single plant deals with those aspects. Well...congratulations. You got further than Albus Dumbledore in figuring out what happened to him.”

“But that is still *taken!*” Severus snaps. “Even if this nonsense about protection is true, it still didn’t answer my question!”

Nizar pulls forth agrimony, sandalwood, peony, sagebrush, myrrh, heliotrope, and the frankincense. “In the old days, all of these plants were thought of as assistants for banishing. Not necessarily in the ridding of evil sense, though that was also a use for them, but in...you asked where. The answer you received is *how*.”

“Why?” Severus asks, glaring down at the cards. He’s no longer concerned about any hint of Divination talent. Now he’s just infuriated because the answer was too vague.

“I don’t know.” Nizar’s eyes flicker shut. “We didn’t call it feverfew in those days. It was adreminte.”

Severus watches in alarm as Nizar wavers in place and then nearly falls face-first onto the tabletop. “Nizar!”

Nizar snaps out of whatever he stumbled onto, dazed and blinking. “It can’t answer you. There is magic in the way that won’t allow you to find where. Only the how, the why, or the what. Not where.”

“Protection,” Severus says. Nizar thinks about it and nods. “From Voldemort?”

“That would be the most obvious threat to Potter.” Nizar shakes his head to clear it and reaches into his robe once more. “It’s useful information, but I don’t know what to do with that right now.”

“Again?” Severus frowns. “Nizar.”

“I’ll only assault your dignity with one gift next winter,” Nizar says, ignoring the expression on Severus’s face. “Forgive me if I want to spoil you rotten.”

Severus grumbles under his breath, but accepts a tiny glass phial with a glass stopper. Inside is an oblong seed, brown with hints of red on each of its thorns. “What is this?”

“I told you the house-elves saturated my quarters with Preservation Charms, right?” Nizar tilts his head at the phial. “That is the last Dragon’s Breath of Life seed in existence.”

Severus nearly drops the phial. “It’s *what*?”

“You heard me.” Nizar hands him a bound scroll. “It’s a viable seed for a plant that’s been extinct for eight centuries. If you follow those instructions, you’ll have the only living Dragon’s Breath of Life plant in the entire world.”

“Why the *fuck* would you give me this?” Severus asks in astonished disbelief. What he’s holding could earn him enough gold to literally buy a country.

“Well, I’m terrible with plants,” Nizar says with a wry smile. “I could make the attempt, but the modern term about black thumbs definitely applies to me. And...why wouldn’t I give it to you? You’re a Potions Master who understands the true value of what he’s holding. That takes me up to seven gifts, by the way—seed, care instructions, and eventually a plant.”

Severus puts the phial and the scroll into his desk drawer. “I’m afraid to ask what the infamous number eight could be.”

“Dobby,” Nizar says, and the odd freed house-elf of Hogwarts appears. Severus is amused to see that he’s adopting Slytherin silver and green, even if that shade of green is atrocious.

“Dobby is remembering, Professor Slytherin!” the elf chirps, handing over a bulky package wrapped in blue paper and twine. “Dobby is wishing the Professor Snape a Happy Hanukkah. There being wizarding children in Hogwarts who will be celebrating tonight!”

“I’m glad they’ll have the opportunity.” The same could not be said of Severus’s time in Hogwarts, when he’d been the only Jewish student in the school for five bloody years. By the time the Stivers, Goldsteins, Vineyards, Glassmans, Rosenbergs, Solomans, Leathermans, and Mordecais starting showing up in Hogwarts again, Severus was in his sixth year and no longer gave a damn.

Nizar gestures for Severus to stand up before he hands over the package, which is soft but has a decent heft. “Inside that trunk from the underground lake was a long length of cloth.” He shoves his hands into his robe pockets and looks unaccountably abashed. “I had no use for it, and Filky knows your measurements, so I asked her to turn it into something for you.”

Severus feels far too self-conscious as he unwraps the package. Inside is a black robe that feels amazing under his hands. “This is the same silk and wool blended fabric that your own robes are made from.”

“It is.” Nizar watches Severus unfold the full length of it. “It was crafted by magical weavers. It will never tear; the threads will never wear thin. Its creation means it has a natural invulnerability to lesser spells, as they can’t penetrate that magical weave.”

“A bloody king’s ransom,” Severus whispers, unsure of what else to say.

Nizar swallows and steps forward. “Here.” He takes the robe from Severus’s hands and helps him to put it on. The warm weight is comfortable without being confining. It falls to his knees, and has an admirable flow in response to movement. The sleeves end at his elbows, as he prefers to keep his clothes out of cauldrons.

Severus lifts his arm and studies the fabric more closely. There is a pattern within the fabric, made from a violet so dark and dusky it disguises itself as black until he pays strict attention. The pattern is also morphing and adjusting as he watches it, an aspect of the magical weaving. “Nizar, this is amazing, but all of this—this is too much.”

“It is not.” Nizar adjusts the fall of the robe over his chest, not looking at him. “A tradition of my time is that a courtship...you present the one you’re courting with items that reflect how much you value them. Hanukkah is just a convenient excuse.”

Severus tries to speak and can’t. Courting gifts. Nizar brought him laughter, practicality, an assurance of safety from mischief, a hand-crafted divination tool that actually works for him, which revealed another aspect of Severus’s magic that he thought unavailable, gave him the key to one of the most powerful plants in existence, and then gifted him a robe made from cloth that no one knows how to make any longer.

“We’re at war, Severus, no matter what the *Daily Prophet* and the Ministry believe,” Nizar says softly. “People die in wars. I’ve seen it, time and time again. You’re always in danger, and that walking fucking corpse thinks he needs to best me in order to prove himself. I’d rather you know how I...” He closes his eyes. “I love you. I’d rather say it now than never have said it at all.”

Severus reaches out and takes one of Nizar’s hands. His fingertips are cold, and there is a fine trembling there that tells him exactly how apprehensive he is to have made that declaration. “Nizar, I’ve nothing I could give you that is even remotely of equal value.”

“Severus, you were my joy when I had nothing. You showed me that the old wall in London survives, a reminder of a past I can never have back. To me?” Nizar looks up at him, his jaw set. “To me, that is worth far more than all of this.”

“Never in my life—no one has ever granted me anything like this, Nizar.”

“Yes, well.” Nizar’s smile looks strained. “If you reject the courtship, I’m refusing the gifts if you try to send them back.”

“That was something people did?” Severus asks, puzzled by the custom.

“It was impolite to send mixed messages,” Nizar says. “If you rejected someone’s courtship but kept what they’d given you, it was the equivalent of...not theft, though there was a

subconscious aspect of stealing to it. Essentially, you were telling the courter that you weren't firm on your decision to reject them." Nizar draws in a breath. "You don't have to say it back, you know. I can wait for you to make that decision, Severus."

"It isn't about the decision," Severus murmurs. "It's about being able to say the words, and I don't know how."

Nizar doesn't seem surprised to hear that, but there is still a hint of tension around his eyes. "Then know that I will be here until you can."

The only thing Severus allows to drag him from his quarters that day is the necessity of putting in an appearance at lunch, if only to remind his Slytherins to behave themselves. Severus wears the gifted robe to the meal. If it's as resistant to damage as Nizar claims—and he has no reason to doubt it—then Severus might as well use it. The expression on Nizar's face is worth it, regardless.

Minerva glances at Severus, pauses, and then looks at him again. "You look very well today, Severus."

He has an uncomfortable moment of *déjà vu*. "Didn't we have this conversation recently?"

"We did, but..." Minerva purses her lips. "I think Nizar's presence is good for you," she says, without any hint that she means to imply *dating*. "You resemble a man your age in bearing and expression, not someone who is insisting upon seeing their first century before they've seen their fortieth birthday."

Severus wonders if it's the removal of the curse remnants from Cruciatus that is causing that impression, or if it is simply in having Nizar's company. He still doesn't like to devote time to his reflection beyond the necessity of shaving, but even he can see that the lines on his face are less severe. "Perhaps," he allows.

"I do like the robe, too," Minerva says in a quieter voice.

"It was a gift."

"Ah. Today is the first day of Hanukkah, isn't it?" Minerva asks, which makes him hide a smile. He always did appreciate that Minerva McGonagall remembered such, whereas others never bothered. "It seems a bit early for a gift. I know our fifteen students aren't celebrating until this evening."

"I've been reminded that I have no useful schedule beyond the bounds of the classroom. Often."

"*Him*," Minerva says under her breath, and there is no doubt who she means. "Then Nizar is most sensible."

They both glance over at Nizar, who never made it to the table. He's been waylaid by both the Slytherins and the Gryffindors, and looks to be either mediating a conversation or inciting one. Miss Bulstrode has made off with Kanza again, pleased with her success.

Minerva smiles. “They both like him, and it’s doing wonders for our infamous rivalry, isn’t it?”

Severus grants her a nod. “I do believe having Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin rip into them during their first class with Nizar was also useful.”

“Those younger versions of Godric and Salazar are still ripping into them,” Minerva says in amusement. “I caught them breaking up a potential tiff just the other day. Younger Rowena and Helga also seem far more active, though Merlin knows what’s going on with those four portraits in the Entrance Hall. They’re much more morose and...well, useless compared to their younger selves.”

“When still portrait-bound, Nizar once mentioned that their portraits might have been tampered with.” Severus frowns. “Whether or not he knows how to fix it, he hasn’t told me. The other portraits who are now assisting us are those whose paintings were never found in public areas—well, except Godric in the Headmaster’s tower, but Albus mentions that the Headmaster’s paintings all bear protective enchantments to keep them from being influenced.”

“Who would tamper with the bloody Founders’ portraits?” Minerva asks in a hiss of outrage.

Severus glances at her. “Someone who wished to create a rivalry.”

He spends the rest of Sunday lounging with Nizar on the sofa, reading, talking, or simply doing nothing. The idea of doing nothing is almost entirely foreign at this point in Severus’s life. He has other responsibilities to attend to, but resting full-length on his couch with Nizar lying pressed against him is far more appealing.

It also means that Nizar falls asleep. Severus brushes his fingers through Nizar’s curling hair, and the only response is a quiet sigh.

You only sleep well when you’re with me, don’t you? Severus thinks, not wishing to voice the question aloud. When they’ve shared a bed for the entire night, Nizar is more often than not still asleep when Severus wakes for the morning. He wonders if it’s a side effect of being trapped alone in a painting (except for Kanza) for nearly ten centuries, or if it’s...something else.

“I blame you for this,” Severus whispers under his breath, putting his book down long enough to grab the uppermost card from the tarot deck. It’s another plant on the card—the hawthorn tree. It has a few medicinal uses in potions, though the wood is considered more important to wand makers. However, knowing its medicinal properties also means he knows the magical lore surrounding it. Hawthorne, tree of hope...and a healing tool for broken hearts.

I am a bloody stuffed bear, Severus realizes, and has to bite back a smile.

Surrey

Chapter Summary

“Read the scroll, Nizar. You will find exactly what you need to know.”

Tuesday morning’s class with his seventh-years goes better than Nizar expected. They’re gleeful over the opportunity to spend thirty minutes in a charm-enforced daydream—the Gryffindors in particular seem intimately familiar with the Weasley twins’ Daydream Charm candy. Then Nizar tells them the purpose of spending thirty minutes under the charm, and the gleefulness becomes welcome intensity and focus.

“So to achieve successful Occlumency—”

“Mind magic,” Nizar says in annoyance. He really hates the disparate terms.

“Right, that,” Jordan says, unoffended. “We need to be able to achieve that level of mental visualization, and then it’s the next step.”

“Essentially.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard. I do that through every History of Magic class, anyway,” Gupta says.

“You *sleep* through every History of Magic class,” Miss Parangyo corrects.

Gupta shrugs. “Same thing.”

“No, it’s not!”

The sixth-years are also doing better at cooperating, which means their practical sessions aren’t poorly telegraphed slaughters. Then Nizar has a Double for the second-years in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, which gives him a roomful of students who are taking to third-year spells (stupid, *useless* textbooks) with intelligent enthusiasm.

Minerva stops by the classroom as he’s chasing them off to tell Nizar that the second-years for Slytherin and Gryffindor won’t be attending his class that day. “Dear gods, why?”

She sighs. “There was an incident in Herbology. Most of them are in the infirmary, and those four who are not are cleaning up the mess.”

“Do I even want to know?” Nizar asks.

Minerva presses her lips together and then leans in close, out of hearing range of the students passing through the corridor. “Rubeus had several different species of pixies set aside from Care of Magical Creatures lessons for the first- and second-years. Dennis Creevy, Miss McDonald, Mister Pritchard, and Miss Bainbridge let them loose in the greenhouses. There was lots of throwing of chomping cabbages and fanged geraniums, among other things.”

“Two Slytherins and two Gryffindors cooperated in a prank against both of their Houses.” Nizar blinks a few times. “You’re proud of them, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” Minerva responds while managing an air of long-suffering. “Fortunately, they created their own punishment in cleaning up the mess, a task that they’re performing together without any ill will between them. I consider it a miracle.”

“My entire Friday is available for them to make up the class they’re missing today,” Nizar offers.

Minerva nods and adjusts her hat. “I’ll send you word after I make certain they have a free timeslot. It might only have to be a single hour. In the meantime, I’ll see you at dinner. Unless you’ve other plans?”

“Not anymore, I don’t.” Nizar waits for Minerva to walk away before he shuts the classroom door. An extra two hours free for the day. He’s tempted to let Severus know, but it’s the final week before the winter holiday. The man is grading with the determination of someone who plans to do nothing of the sort from twenty-third December through seventh January.

He goes into his quarters, mentally reshuffling his day. Kanza mutters sleepily about being chilled, so he leaves her to bask on the hearthstone directly in front of the fireplace.

Neither can live while the other survives, Nizar thinks idly. Well, that is one thing he’s been wanting to do, but a Slytherin Head of House and teaching have filled his days. “*Elfric, would you tell the portraits who belong in the storage room frames that I’d like to speak with them?*”

Elfric sits up from his idle conversation with one of the garden snakes from a portrait on the second floor. “*Of course, Father. Iago can help me.*”

“*Thank you Elfric, Iago,*” Nizar says, watching them depart the frame in opposite directions.

Nizar goes into the storage room and settles himself into the armchair the elves were kind enough to add to his quarters, propping his feet up on the oak trunk. It doesn’t take very long for Godric, Helga, Salazar, and Rowena to appear, which means Elfric must have enlisted other assistance. If the four wandered far enough away, it could have taken hours to locate them.

“Don’t you have class right now?” Rowena asks him, smiling.

“Well, I did, but it was canceled.” Nizar tells them about the Herbology incident.

Godric and Salazar grin at each other. “That would be our fault, and we’re not sorry,” Salazar says.

“The two of you are absolutely terrible, and I’m very proud.” Nizar exchanges glances with Helga, who is doing a terrible job of trying to appear disappointed with the others. Next it will be the Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws up to mischief, but at least theirs might entail less disastrous cleanup. “Do any of you know of that prophecy regarding Voldemort?”

They put aside the Herbology incident and turn somber. “We did, though we only learned of it in the spring of 1980,” Godric answers. “That was when the current Headmaster first revealed and discussed the prophecy with those portraits within the Headmaster’s office.”

“Which means your elder portrait promptly found the rest of you and shared information,” Nizar interprets.

Helga narrows her eyes. “The bit about a child being born in July of parents who thrice-defied Voldemort was a bit harder, and of course we told the Headmaster that he wouldn’t know until those births happened.”

“Ultimately, there were only two couples left fighting in the war who met both criteria,” Rowena says. “The Potters and the Longbottoms.”

“Longbottom? Oh, poor Neville.” Granted, Longbottom is getting much better in Defence, and seems determined to figure out his problem with plants in Potions. Nizar suspects there are other aspects at play that turned the young man into the stammering mess that he first met in November.

Nizar looks at each portrait in turn, though it’s most obvious in Helga’s expression. “None of you like Albus Dumbledore, do you?”

“We...respect him,” Rowena says in a careful tone. “As a magic-worker, and someone who recognized that fighting Voldemort was necessary then, and is necessary now.”

“But otherwise I want to throttle the life out of him,” Helga growls.

Nizar raises an eyebrow. “All right, then. I haven’t witnessed anything that makes me want him dead yet, though I readily admit I don’t trust him. I just don’t know why.” The rudeness, that first attempt at reading Nizar’s mind, is only part of the problem. He’s never spoken of a deeper feeling, so nebulous that he doesn’t even know how to articulate it.

Salazar is shaking his head. “*Idiota*. You still haven’t read that scroll, have you?”

“No.” Nizar glares at him. “I’ve been a bit busy since Hallowe’en night, what with teaching —”

“A courtship.” Helga looks smug.

“—and trying to cope with the panic that is learning to live in this fucking century!” Nizar finishes. “Is it anything I need to know right away?”

“Si tú haces esa pregunta, entonces tú necesita saber.”

Nizar rolls his eyes at Salazar. “Does no one remember how to answer a question with the words ‘yes’ or ‘no’ any longer?”

Rowena gives him a worried look. “Read the scroll, Nizar. You will find exactly what you need to know.”

He swings his legs down from the top of the trunk. “Dear gods, fine.” He lifts the lid of the trunk, sorting through the large pile of bottle-sent correspondence and the old wand to fish out the scroll. He flips it around in his hands, taking a moment to stare at the original green seal for their House. “I hope that this is far less cryptic than the rest of you,” he mutters, prying up the wax.

When he unrolls the scroll, Nizar discovers nothing more enlightening than blank paper. “What—blank? Why the hell is this blank?”

Words form on the surface of the paper like black ripples on a pond: *Because you didn’t use the password.*

“I don’t remember a bloody password. That’s part of the problem!”

The ink ripples appear again. *What is your name, you idiot?*

“Oh, hints. I like hints.” Nizar waits for the words to clear. “*My name is Nizar Hariwalt, el Lord de León, Casa de Deslizarse de Castilla y Moravia,*” he hisses. More black ink ripples over the page in response to Parseltongue, leaving words behind in its wake.

In modern English.

Nizar reads through the message twice before he looks up at his family. “Is this a fucking joke?”

“No, dearest.” Helga’s sympathetic expression is not helping.

“This is why we were so concerned about how much you lost from the failure of the Preservation Charm,” Rowena says.

“Or more accurately, whoever was foolish enough to move the damned painting,” Godric mutters, scowling.

Nizar sits down heavily in the chair and spends a few minutes convincing himself not to hyperventilate. He doesn’t remember this—not any of it!

The words come up unbidden; Salazar’s voice, asking him of Galiena’s magical adoption: *Do you want to change her name?*

Why would I want to do that? he’d responded. *Her given name is just fine. It’s the family name I’m concerned about, Sal.*

Galiena, Brice, and Elfric deSlizarse, their last attempt at convincing the Cumbric, Pictish, and English speakers of the isles to please stop butchering their family name. By the time Salazar and Marion were having their first children, they didn't even try. Fortunata's younger siblings were all called Slytherin.

Nizar looks back up at the portraits, who are staring down at him in varying levels of commiseration...and quite possibly pity. "Sal," he whispers. "Sal, please. Tell me this isn't what it says."

"If you could remember how much I did not wish you to return to this place, you would understand how much it hurts me to tell you that I can do no such thing." Salazar tilts his head at the scroll. "Read it again, brother, one more time. Pay attention to what it does *not* say."

Nizar Hariwalt, el Lord de León, Casa de Deslizarse de Castilla y Moravia

The Mormaerdom under the reign of Findláech mac Ruaidrí, High King of Alba,

1st October in the year 1,017

It is my hope that this is entirely unnecessary. However, I've seen the most carefully laid plans destroyed by variables I doubt even the gods could see coming, so I'm in no mood to take chances. Not with this. Not with how much hinges on this ludicrous plot's success.

If you've lost nothing to the centuries, then reading further is unnecessary unless it's driven by fond curiosity. If you do not recall, then know that I'm trying to write of what is most necessary without writing another book.

(I hope the books survived. It would be nice to see if they can be improved upon.)

By the time this scroll is in your hands again, at least nine hundred seventy-eight years will have passed. None of us have ever done anything like this before, but Salazar is the idiot who didn't make certain you could travel forward in time before yanking someone else backwards.

No. That isn't entirely fair.

Time is a circle: Salazar adopted you as his brother because he sent you back to be his brother. One happened, so must the other be. Don't think too harshly of him, even if he's an idiot. Just think—unless he's fucked up in the interim between Augustus and November, you'll soon have the pleasure of telling him so once more.

On the first day of Martius—March, dammit, remember that it is March—you met Salazar Fernan, Marqués de León, Casa de Deslizarse de Castilla y Moravia in a village then known as Castlevew, which will one day be called Hogsmeade.

Why did they change the name? What was wrong with Castlevew? I am forty-two years old and I still do not understand people at all.

That same day, you had your first meeting with Orellana Constanza, Marquésa de León, Casa de Luz de Sol de Castile. Fortunata Constanza, Lady de León y Castile, Casa de Luz de Sol. Duchess Rowena, House of Raven's Claw in the Duchy of Bavaria, Keeper of the Eastern Seat of Hogwarts' magic. Lady Helga Hlodvirs dóttir of the Norse Earldom of Orkney, keeper of the Northern Seat of Hogwarts' magic. Godric, Eorl of Griffon's Door, the Earldom of Wessex in the Kingdom of England, Keeper of the Southern Seat of Hogwarts' magic. Salazar held the West Seat. Well—holds, I suppose. I sometimes suspect that those connections are permanent.

Salazar claimed you as his brother by means of magical adoption during the Lencten Equinox of 991. There is some sort of familial relation at play beyond that, but we were never able to determine how aside from the fact that the link of blood is very, very distant, and it isn't just time making it so. Basically, Salazar met another Parselmouth and decided he was keeping you. He does that.

Galiena, Brice, and Elfric used to tell everyone who would listen that I have the same bad habit.

Of more immediate concern is this: Salazar Fernan de Casa de Deslizarse met you for the first time in March of 990. You, on the other hand, met Salazar for the very first time on 31st Iulius, 1995.

I'd tell you not to panic, but if you've forgotten all of this, then that would be pointless. I will instead tell you this, as I literally cannot write otherwise. Your name is Nizar Hariwalt de Casa de Deslizarse. No one can take that from you—not magic, time, or death itself. The core of who you are did not change, but as far as magic is concerned, the person you used to be ceased to exist the moment the magical adoption was complete.

Someone might be able to identify you, even with that damnable scar and the soul jar behind it long removed. You, however, will never be able to say your name is anything but what I've written. It is magically binding. If I'd realized that spring that I wouldn't even be able to lie about my own name afterwards, I would have ordered Salazar to fix the stupid contract. Not being able to lie about your identity is sarding inconvenient. Not even nicknames are useful. An Euskaran Hari is not the same thing as a Saxon Harold.

That was supposed to be July, not Iulius, wasn't it?

If it's any consolation, I'm currently terrified out of my wits.

Nizar stares at the letter. "No, it's not any consolation at all!"

"Nizar?"

"Shut up, Sal! I am busy having a panic-driven nervous breakdown!" Nizar snaps. He tosses the scroll into the trunk and bends over in the chair, trying to breathe.

"Didn't stir a bit of memory, did it?" Godric sounds concerned.

“No!” Nizar shoves his hands into his hair. “Was my life so terrible that I did my best to forget it?”

“No, *hermanito*,” Salazar says quietly. “Harsh and difficult, yes, but it was not your intention to forget. Now: what did you say by not saying it at all?”

Nizar stares down at the stone floor. Think. Think, dammit.

Of more immediate concern is this: Salazar Fernan de Casa de Deslizarse met you for the first time in March of 990. You, on the other hand, met Salazar for the very first time on 31st Iulius, 1995.

“Oh, fuck,” Nizar whispers. He slams the trunk closed and bolts from the storage room, skidding to a stop in his sitting room and turning in a full circle. London, he needs to— London.

Nizar glances down at his clothes. Long vest, not a robe, one of the more sedate ones that appears to be solid black unless he encounters another person with tetrachromacy. He can wear this in London and look overdressed, not out of place. Wand is in his sleeve, knives in his boots.

He slams his way out of his quarters, through his classroom. The classroom door echoes in its frame with a loud thud before it disappears, but by then he’s already rushing down the corridor and taking the steps on the Grand Stair two or three at a time. Students shout in confusion or give him odd looks as he flies by, but all Nizar can see is a blur of faces and robes blending together.

Nizar hits the second floor landing and finds a complete traffic jam of students, frogs singing in confusion, and Filius trying to be heard above the din. “Shit,” he mutters under his breath. Now that he’s stopped overreacting and started thinking again, it’s far too late to simply Apparate out of Hogwarts. Not if he wants to keep that secret, at least.

There is a window to his right. Nizar unlatches it, ignores the chill air that comes rushing in, and dives out of the window. He plummets a full story before he remembers the basics of levitating.

Instead of breaking a limb on the ground, he hits and rolls, coming up with twigs in his hair and startling the hell out of Argus Filch’s cat. “Sorry,” Nizar gasps in apology, and runs for the closest edge of the Anti-Apparition wards. He swings his way up into a sturdy tree, races down an old limb that reaches towards the fence line, jumps, and then Apparates in midair the moment he’s beyond the school’s boundary.

Nizar arrives in the London alleyway that Severus introduced him to and leans against the wall, panting for breath. The sound of traffic from Charing Cross Road is a lot louder today than it had been last Friday evening.

Enough, he tells himself. It’s time to stop bloody reacting and to start fucking thinking. He has no idea where Salazar could be, aside from the obvious fact that Salazar was the one who that stupid device was detecting in London.

He doesn't need to know where Salazar is. He just needs to look where Salazar would expect Nizar to search. Diagon Alley is obvious—too obvious. It would be hard to look for one magical being among a multitude.

Surrey. Guildford was a proper village, even in Nizar's time.

Nizar casts the Invisibility Charm and then Apparates again to Guildford, within the bounds of the old Christian church in the area. He nearly lands on the old parish priest in residence and holds his breath as the old man looks around, confused by the sudden breeze. Nizar relaxes when the white-haired old man goes on his way, muttering about drafty old cathedrals and how no amount of money will ever keep the wind out.

Nizar glances over to see a side door in the old wall. He uses his wand to open it and close it before dropping the charm, shoving his wand back into his sleeve. He doesn't have to fake being out of breath when the old priest turns around.

"Hello," the old man greets him, a kind but puzzled smile on his face. "My flock usually use the front doors, my friend."

"Er, yes, my apologies." Nizar falls back on the manners he used to charm his way through Courts across Europe and Asia. "I'm a bit desperate, and didn't mean to be rude. I'm lost, you see, and I have an appointment in the north, in Little Whinging, only I've no idea how to get there from here."

"You're in the wrong township, and on the wrong side of the river, besides," the priest says. He gives Nizar's face and his long vest a curious look. "From across the water, too, I think. I can easily understand how you'd become so easily lost. Any of us will tell you that British transit is confusing even if you're used to it. How did you happen to lose your way?"

"I missed my...bus," Nizar hedges. "I was told there was a rail line nearby—" He hopes, anyway, "—but I can't seem to locate it. Would you be so kind as to grant me directions?"

Flattery almost always wins, at least among those who still appreciate kind words. Nizar has directions, indulges the old man in a quick prayer for safe travel, and is on his way in five minutes.

A Muggle "convenience" store with scalding bright lighting has a rack of maps near the door. Nizar picks one up for Surrey, makes a copy, and discreetly tucks the copy into his sleeve before moving on. He walks across the River Wey, then heads north until he's at a station for Friary. Reading signs leads him to Platform Six; the clock on the wall announces that it's three-forty. The next train north to Woking is at four o'clock.

Nizar sits down on a bench to wait and has a delightful conversation with a little blonde girl, no older than six, who is absolutely delighted by the long line of buttons on his vest, the subtle, silver-edged embroidery, and especially the curl of Nizar's hair.

It's a good thing I'm not into stealing children, Nizar thinks, side-eying the girl's mother. The woman is oblivious as to where her daughter's attention has wandered.

Nizar gets on the train when it arrives, waits until no one is looking, and re-casts the Invisibility Charm. He feels guilty about depriving the conductor of their fare, but he has no way to pay for a ticket.

It's a half-hour train ride to Woking, but the map he copied says that Little Whinging is on a rail stop beyond it on the same line, just before Ottershaw. It takes another twenty minutes to get there, putting his arrival at fifteen minutes before five.

The train stops in front of a horrifyingly precise settlement, which is unfortunately his destination. Nizar removes the charm again once he's well beyond the rail station, wandering along the paved streets while occasionally checking the map.

He is completely, utterly baffled at how people can live in this village. Everything is laid out in a grid that looks to have been measured within an inch of its life. The neighborhoods all look exactly alike but for their street names; the homes are identical. Even the flowerbeds are competing on which is the best copy of the other.

The only useful aspect of the grid is that it's not difficult to find Privet Drive. Maybe it's Nizar's imagination, but the identical nature of homes and gardens seems to be even worse on that street. Number Four is recognizable only by the fact that it has the number four on a box out front, and a matching number is posted on the wall near the home's door.

Nizar remains on the opposite side of the street, studying the house. He has no idea what Potter's relatives are like, but he feels sorry for that child already.

The Dursley home feels wrong to him. That is less a home and more of a symbol—though how the people within can view that structure as a symbol when it's exactly like every other house around it is beyond Nizar's comprehension.

Nizar puts aside his confusion. He's standing in front of a building that is tied to a mystery he wants to solve, and now he has opportunity to do so. Severus and Dumbledore both said that there was a sacrificial blood protection attached to that child, provided by his mother's death. Voldemort might have lessened it, but...

He frowns. "It's anchored to the physical address? That can't fucking be right." He prods at the house, exploring the warped sense of magic surrounding it. Beneath the sickly feeling of magic going wrong, he can sense the original, protective intent that created the magic in the first place.

What the fuck? That magic should be attached to Potter and Potter alone, not a fucking house!

"You going to be staring at that house all day?" a passing woman asks him curiously.

Nizar glances at her, catching an intense whiff of housecat, which explains the liberal coating of cat hair on her clothes. "Well, they're staring back."

The older woman squints in Number Four's direction. "That'll be Petunia Dursley, then. She's most likely trying to figure if you're the type she'd approve of being here."

“Somehow, I really doubt it,” Nizar says. “Does she think you belong here?”

The old woman snorts. “Only if she wants somethin’ unpleasant done. You have a good evening, young man.”

“And you as well.” Nizar waits for her to move on down the walk. “Well...now what?”

Another public walkway lines the street on Number Four’s side of the drive. At the very least, he wants a closer look at whatever is going wrong with that blood magic.

The moment his foot comes down on the walk in front of Number Four’s mailbox, a horrendous racket splits the air. Nizar leaps back in shock even as he identifies it.

Cattrgiellan. Fucking Caterwauling Charm—

“YOUR FACE! YOUR FACE, I ABSOLUTELY SWEAR!”

Nizar turns and bolts back across the street. There is a dark-haired man leaning against someone’s brick stand that holds another numbered box, howling with laughter. “I WILL BLOODY WELL KILL YOU!” He’s not certain if his heart is pounding from the stupid *Cattrgiellan* or because—because—

“You used to claim such three times a week!” the instigator of the *Cattrgiellan* replies right before Nizar leaps into his arms. “Hello!”

“Oh, my *gods*, Sal!” Nizar clings with all his might as he’s spun in a dizzying circle. “Where the hell have you been?”

“A lot of places!” Salazar yells back in delight. “We’re attracting attention!”

“OI! WHAT ARE YOU TWO QUEERS DOING ON MY GOOD STREET?”

Salazar lets go of Nizar so they can both turn and stare at Number Four. A man the size of a British mountain troll is blocking most of the open doorway to the house. “THIS IS MY BROTHER, YOU TWIT!” Nizar shouts, incensed. It seems not everyone has gotten over three hundred odd years of gender issues.

“OH! WELL. MY MISTAKE.” The troll slams the door shut.

“Was that...Vernon Dursley?” Nizar asks, trying to equate that indistinct, rude shadow with a person.

“The one and only,” Salazar says in an irritated voice.

Nizar looks over to see that Salazar and his eldest portrait must have been conspiring together. Except for the extra lines on his face and the increase of white in his dark hair and beard, Salazar looks exactly as Nizar remembers him. Of course, he’s never seen Salazar in a black t-shirt, a short jacket that looks like it’s been beaten to hell and back, denims, and lace-up boots before, but the look suits him. Salazar’s hair and beard are cropped very short, probably fitting in with non-magical trends rather than magical fashion.

“I see you still have your hair,” Nizar offers when he can’t think of anything else.

“It’s amazing how much older you look if you shave it all off and charm your beard into a magnificent grey,” Salazar replies, and then his smile fades into a frown. “Why did you need to ask about Dursley?”

“Because I have no idea who he is.”

“Gods wept and drowned the valleys.” Salazar draws in a breath. “How much did you lose?”

Nizar glances at him from the corner of his eye and tries to smile. “A lot. What time is it?” he asks, realizing only then that he never put his watch on that morning.

Salazar peers at a wristwatch strapped so that its face rests against the inside of his forearm. “A quarter until five o’clock.”

“Ah. Then I’ve known about that—” Nizar jerks his thumb in the direction of Number Four, “—and *you*, for an hour and fifteen minutes.”

“Oh.” Salazar stares at him. “Then...you don’t remember anything about them.”

“No.” Nizar is sort of bewildered to realize that he’s crying. “You’re not dead. This isn’t a very good illusion.”

“No, and no.” Salazar reaches out and takes Nizar’s hand. “See, I expected the waterworks to be my response.”

Nizar wipes at his face. “I can’t believe it.”

“You’re the one who just told me it hasn’t been two hours yet.” Salazar slings his arm over Nizar’s shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get the hell out of this appalling neighborhood. There’s a nice pub in London with private rooms. If either of us are to talk of how very long it’s been since we’ve seen each other, I think that’s a conversation best kept to ourselves.”

It’s a lot easier to find safe Apparition points with darkness falling. Salazar guides them behind a tree in a playpark with a few children lingering. Nizar barely notices the Side-Along Apparition. He’s still irritated by how outdated everyone’s clothing is. Severus might be fond of black, but at least he can go out into non-magical London and look like he belongs in this bloody century.

Nizar feels his chest tighten as Salazar escorts him to a wall that parts to allow them passage to the Leaky Cauldron’s back door. Severus. What the hell is Nizar going to tell him about this? Salazar is eminently more explainable than everything else!

The Leaky Cauldron is alive with evening chatter from magical patrons surrounding tables, drinking from bottles or having supper—no, dinner. Nizar really wants to throttle whoever decided that the term “lunch” needed to exist.

“Evening, Tom!” Salazar greets the barkeep behind the long wooden countertop.

“Evening, Saul!” Tom the barkeep has the florid skin and features of a man from the western isle and dresses like it’s still the 1770s, but he seems friendly enough. “See you’ve brought a friend this evening—oh, and it would be you who finally dragged that new Defence teacher out of hiding.”

“I’m not *new*,” Nizar says dryly. “More like very, very old.”

“Still were hidin’ up in a Scottish castle.” Tom smiles and holds out his hand. “Tom Leary’s the name, Professor Slytherin.”

“Nice to meet you.” Nizar has to all but stomp on a sudden sense of déjà vu that makes no sense. “I wasn’t exactly hiding. I was practically penniless until very recently. Penniless people don’t visit pubs, Tom Leary.”

“Just Tom’s fine, old lad.” Tom gives him a puzzled look. “Hogwarts leave off on paying its professors, did it?”

Nizar smiles. “Everyone likes to conveniently forget that I’m still offended by centralized banking and this century’s lack of manners. I’m also used to London being the equivalent of a square mile of land instead of a growth that has taken over all of southeastern England.”

Tom laughs aloud. “Plenty of manners on this end, else me Mam would rise from her grave and slap my ears off for forgetting them. Best description of London I’ve heard in years, too.”

“Got a private room available, Tom?” Salazar asks. “If I leave you at it, you’ll talk all night, and I won’t have the opportunity to chat up the man at all!”

Nizar follows Salazar and Tom up the stairs, taking a quick glance at the pub’s dining room as he does so. Half the residents are staring and pointing at him. Unlike Hogwarts, which is used to the idea that Nizar isn’t there to murder them all, there is a fair amount of aggression and fear on those faces.

He resists the urge to roll his eyes. Maybe when Tom comes back downstairs, blatantly not dead, they’ll calm down.

The room looks like it’s meant for overnights, but Salazar gestures for Nizar to take a seat at the table. Then Salazar gets out his wand—the same familiar, rune-blackened cherrywood wand, twin to Nizar’s own—and casts a privacy charm that encloses the room.

About a minute after Tom leaves, four different bottles pop into existence on the table. “Bottoms up. I don’t know about you, but I bloody well need it.”

Nizar pulls the cork from a bottle, sniffs, and leans away, his eyes watering. “Oh, gods. Who decided that hops needed to mate with beer?”

“An idiot,” Salazar replies, pulling the cork from a bottle filled with bubbling yellow liquid. “If I’d wanted my sinuses to mate with hops, I could go out and chew on the plant directly.”

Nizar shoves the cork back into the beer bottle. The next one he opens is mead, thank goodness. Nizar downs half of it before he puts the bottle back on the table. His hands are

steadier, even though his heart is still sitting in his throat. “Salazar.”

“Still me,” Salazar says, a corner of his mouth lifting up. “You called me *old* the first time we met, and I looked exactly like this.”

“You deserved it. I think. I don’t remember that, either.” Nizar shrugs when Salazar looks distressed. “I’m sorry. What the fuck are you drinking?”

Salazar lifts the bottle. “Butterbeer. Came about some centuries ago. It’s sweetened, carbonated butter with a few herbs tossed in. It’s not all that bad, really.”

“I’ll take your word on it.” Nizar isn’t sure he wants to drink sweetened liquid butter straight from a bottle.

“Well, let’s cut to the bad news first. I always do prefer to get that out of the way.” Salazar drains the butterbeer. “How much lost memory are we talking of?”

“Keep in mind that the only reason I know this is because the portraits of yourself, Rowena, Helga, and Godric told me,” Nizar begins, trying to swallow his heart back down where it belongs. “Someone moved the painting.”

“GODS DAMMIT IT!” Salazar shouts. “WHOSE BRILLIANT FUCKING IDEA WAS THAT?”

Nizar rubs at his ears. “I don’t need to be partially amnesiac *and* deaf, Sal. I can’t answer that question because I don’t remember. I didn’t remember that I was even in the wrong place to begin with. Our current Slytherin Head of House moved the painting back to the wall above the fireplace in 1982.”

“Thank the fucking gods for that, else you might not even be here!” Salazar steals the beer and drinks it, unwanted hops and all. “The Preservation Charm didn’t have enough power to do its job.”

“Everything before the adoption is gone.” Nizar passes over a handkerchief when Salazar chokes and spews beer from his nose. “Drinking doesn’t make it better. Granted, I’ve been hiding Death in a Bottle from myself for that very reason.”

Salazar wipes his face. “All right. What else?”

“I don’t remember being *him* at all. I don’t remember meeting you that first time, though I do remember our family, our home, Castile, Ipuzko, Hogwarts...” Nizar polishes off the mead. “Some of it has come back, like Rowena said. I finally remembered tea.”

“Priorities,” Salazar notes with a faint smile.

“I thought so. There are things missing from my time in the portrait, too. I remember the Third Crusade, but not much from the twelfth century. The 1700s are a blank; I assume not much of interest happened to be worth remembering.”

“Scotland was in the middle of a revolution in the 1700s. You should at least have remembered that.” Salazar is staring at him in open concern. “Is there anything worse?”

“I didn’t remember how to be a bloody Metamorphmagus. I’m glad I still had a book about it, and that the updating translation spells that I *don’t remember placing* did their jobs on the books in my office and quarters. Still decent enough with a wand, and I lost nothing from my defence masteries, but I don’t remember agreeing to that nonsense with the portrait. Why didn’t we just do with me whatever it was you did to yourself?” Nizar asks.

Salazar grimaces. “Because my lengthy survival didn’t involve a portrait. Shit. This isn’t quite what I expected of this reunion, little brother.”

“Why not?”

Salazar rolls the bottle back and forth in his hands. “I haven’t been back to the castle since the thirty-first of October in 1039, Nizar. I’ve seen it a few times, from a distance, but I’ve not been within those walls in nine hundred fifty-six years. I didn’t—I had no idea what my presence might change, and didn’t dare take the chance. I just hoped that no one would bother you until Hallowe’en of this year. I’m glad Severus Snape had the sense to put you back, even if neither of you knew it was correcting an earlier error.”

“You know of Severus?”

Salazar nods. “I do. I keep track of all our Slytherins, especially one that has put such effort into playing both sides with brilliant expertise.”

“I don’t even want to know how you became aware of that—you’re the fucking Underground,” Nizar blurts in realization.

Salazar tilts his head with a smile that radiates smug pleasure. “I and a few others. Severus is a smart one to have stumbled over our existence so quickly. Are you friends with the current Head of my House, *hermanito*?”

“Friends.” Nizar lifts both eyebrows. “In a sense.”

Salazar gives him a confused look before he starts smiling again. “Truly?”

“Don’t start.” Nizar leans back in his chair and sighs. “At the *moment*, yes.” Tomorrow might be another matter entirely.

“I was also expecting you just after Hallowe’en,” Salazar says. “At least now I know why you are so very late. If you’d forgotten, how did you discover otherwise?”

“Contingency measures and paranoia, Sal,” Nizar replies. “I left myself a sealed letter, but I didn’t look at it at first. I was half-convinced it was from Galiena or one of the children to tell me that you were gone. Instead, I read a scroll in modern English that tells me you created a time loop of sending yourself a brother because you’d already sent yourself a brother.”

Salazar points at him with the beer bottle. “You’d love ‘Doctor Who.’ Well, we’d have to find bootleg recordings at this point, but it was a marvelously ludicrous television show.”

Nizar gives him a helpless look.

“Oh, little brother. No clue about television?” Salazar asks, grinning.

“I fell out of a fucking painting forty-nine days ago, Sal,” Nizar retorts, annoyed.

“Good point. What’ve you been doing with yourself, if not learning of what’s become of our world?”

Nizar picks up the last bottle of mead, pours half of it into his empty bottle, and leaves the other half for Salazar. “There was an idiot in the Defence teaching position who was literally torturing students who displeased her. I took my fucking job back just to get rid of her. Since then I’ve been teaching a lot of children how to not die. Most of them have no idea of even the basics of self-defence, Sal. That Voldemort prick left a curse inside the room they were using to teach Defence—no instructor to last longer than a year in the post, and no student but those bearing intense strength of will would ever learn anything useful inside that room. Forty years of utterly botched Defence lessons to every magical child in Britain, Sal.”

“I didn’t know about that, but it explains a few things.” Salazar slumps back in his chair, scowling. “It makes me wish to argue with you as to who gets to kill that prick, but I’m still certain it has to be you.”

“I want him dead, no matter who or what makes him that way.” Nizar batters his way through deep hesitation. “Salazar. Did you and the others dig a fucking Horcrux out of my head?”

Salazar lowers his gaze. “Yes. Lost that one too, did you? I find I prefer that. It wasn’t a pleasant process.”

“They never are.” Nizar feels the first flush of warmth in his limbs from the mead, and welcomes the sensation. “How are you still alive, Sal?”

“I made a deal with an Aspect,” Salazar answers.

Nizar didn’t think this evening held any more surprises of that magnitude, but Salazar always excelled at proving people wrong. “What kind of deal, and what kind of fucking Aspect?”

“Oh, well, Death—lovely chap, or lass, or...something. It wasn’t obvious, and it seemed impolite to try to make those distinctions. I made a deal with Death, Nizar.”

Nizar stares at him. “Sal, you’re an idiot.”

Salazar smiles. “Have you been waiting for the opportunity to say it, little brother?”

“Salazar, you’re an idiot!” Nizar repeats, wide-eyed. “What kind of fucking bargain did you make with bloody *Death*?”

“To not die,” Salazar tells him in a patient voice. “That part should be obvious.”

“And how did you pay for that sort of bargain?”

“I was given three items not of this earth. Death asked me to deliver those items to a very specific family, under a *very* specific set of circumstances,” Salazar explains, taking up the half-full bottle of mead after the beer is gone. “That took about two hundred years. Afterwards, I had about seven hundred fifty years with nothing to do but wander the planet, learn new languages, forget a hell of a lot more of them, read, enjoy the technological advances from magical and non-magical beings alike, impersonate Godric far too many times to be healthy...”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle, Sal,” Nizar interrupts. “Where did that bastard come from?”

“I had a dalliance with a beautiful lady in the 1400s. It wasn’t a serious relationship, and the lady in question never had the decency to inform me that I’d left her with a child.”

Nizar manages a brief smile. “Maybe she was being sensible.”

“Yes, actually,” Salazar agrees without a hint of amusement. “She didn’t want anyone to know whom she’d had that dalliance with. It was the 1400s, and you and I do rather resemble our Castilian and Ipuzko heritage. Spain and France were in the midst of a competition to discover who could do a better job of inciting the English into a frothing rage.”

“I’m not certain there is anyone who does *not* incite the English into a frothing rage on a regular basis, and that includes the English themselves. I’ve heard magical children from non-magical households talk about those football matches.”

“Do you even know what a football is?” Salazar asks with a wide smile.

“I know that it’s round, kicked with a foot, and apparently drives people out of their minds and causes regular sporting-based riots,” Nizar replies dryly.

“I’d planned to say something sarcastic, but that pretty much hits the nail on the head,” Salazar grants him.

“I really want to rant about your making deals with Death, but I’m remembering I spent almost ten centuries hanging on the wall as a portrait,” Nizar says. “I don’t think I have enough ground to stand on when it comes to accusing people of doing stupid shit. I agreed to be a painting; that has to involve some serious mental instability.”

Salazar nods in wry acknowledgement. “We did rather set the scale for oddities a bit high, didn’t we?”

Nizar rests his face in his hands for a minute before he straightens up. “We really did. Are you coming back with me? Your Head of House and I are feeling outnumbered.” He’s trying for a light tone, but has no idea if he succeeds or not. He’s too desperate for Salazar to *not leave*.

“I can’t. Not yet.” Salazar gives him a look of sorrowful regret. “When you did still remember this time, you asked me to look after a few people that you cared for. That’s why I’m in London, little brother. I promised you that I would do so, and that is a promise I intend to keep.”

“Anyone I know?” Nizar asks, curious.

Salazar glances away. “Not anymore.”

“Right.” Nizar blows out a steadying breath. “Tactical advantages and all. The less I know, the safer they are.”

“I would have to set up a hell of a lot of security measures, and methods of direct communication, were I to leave the area.” Salazar frowns. “It might be possible, but it would take careful planning. In the meantime, I’d rather Riddle be more concerned with his great grand-uncle, and remain entirely unaware of the fact that his great-grandfather would also like to smear him into a thin paste along the floor.”

“I’ve met him,” Nizar says, and Salazar nods.

“I’m aware, and no, it’s best not to ask how. What did you think of Lord Voldemort, little brother?”

“He’s an idiot,” Nizar says flatly.

“That he is,” Salazar agrees, “but that doesn’t mean he isn’t a threat.”

“Even idiots can present a valid threat. I know better, *hermano*.”

Salazar smiles. “Yes, but you’re a lunatic. I just thought I’d remind you.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Look into a mirror, *pendejo*, and you’ll find a similar truth staring back at you.” He reaches across the tabletop, relieved when Salazar grips his hand. “You’ll be about. You won’t be disappearing from the rest of my life.”

“I’m here until Voldemort is defeated. That was the deal,” Salazar tells him in a soft voice. “Once that is done...then I can’t be.”

Nizar tightens his grip on Salazar’s hand. “Then please come back to Hogewáþ with me, you idiot! I might be fortunate enough to kill this stupid prick tomorrow!”

Salazar lets out an amused huff of laughter. “Oh, if only it were going to be that fucking easy. Nizar, little brother—I’ve had my time. I’d dearly love to spend what time I have left with you, and I’ll do my best to make it happen...but I was born on twenty-eighth December in 969, over a thousand years ago. I understand Myrddin’s eccentrics so well now, Nizar. Humans aren’t meant to live for a thousand years, especially when we’re not careful in our bargains.”

“Then until you’ve arranged those protections, I see you once a month, on Friday or Saturday. You come and find me in Hogwarts, and bring enough bloody alcohol to last the night.” Nizar swallows. “I’d like to have the chance to catch up on your life for as long as you’re still around to tell me of it.”

“The last weekend of January should give me enough time,” Salazar decides. “Will that do?”

“I suppose it has to,” Nizar says, and starts away from the wall out of defence-driven habit before he realizes it’s only Severus’s Patronus entering the room.

The doe gives him a reproachful look and says, “You know, half the staff is looking for you.”

“Oh. Right. That was daytime. That was probably entertaining to witness.” Nizar retrieves his wand and casts his Patronus. “Please find Severus and tell him I’ll be along shortly.” The basilisk hisses in agreement and crawls out through the same wall the doe entered by.

Salazar reaches for his wand, and Nizar allows him to take it. His brother regards the cherrywood and the runes like he’s holding a precious relic. “What did you do?” he asks as he returns Nizar’s wand.

“Oh, well. I read that scroll, realized you were still alive in July of this year, panicked, jumped out of a window, crossed the Anti-Apparition wards I’m pretending still apply to me, and Apparated directly to London. Without telling anyone.”

Salazar starts laughing, the lines at the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. “And everyone wondered why that drunken bit of a Hat had no idea what to do with you!”

“Wit of a Ravenclaw, loyalty of a Hufflepuff, cunning of a Slytherin, and blind idiocy of a Gryffindor,” Nizar quotes primly, which just sets Salazar off laughing again. “I mean it, Salazar. Last week of January. I’m expecting you on the twenty-sixth. If you’re not there, I will come and find you, and you will not enjoy being dragged across the Scottish Highlands!”

Salazar nods and stands up. Nizar hugs him tightly, burying his face against his brother’s shoulder. Beneath some hint of fragrance is the tang of salt on the ocean wind, just as he remembers.

“I’ll see you soon. I promise,” Salazar vows, and then Disapparates from the room.

Nizar stands there, looking at the place Salazar disappeared from, before he frowns. “You left me to pick up the tab, you shit!”

Time is a Circle

Chapter Summary

“A Slytherin who says they have no reason to agree to the request of a loved one is a Slytherin who thinks of them that way no longer.”

Tom Leary seems to be used to Salazar’s ways with a pub tab. He smiles and waves off Nizar’s attempt to pay him, saying he’ll take it out of “Saul’s” hide the next time they meet.

If people are looking for Nizar, he doesn’t have the option of Apparating directly back to his quarters unless he wants everyone to know that it’s possible. Annoying. Instead, he Apparates to the school’s front gates and walks through when they open as they recognize his approach. It’s after dark, and it’s the dinner hour, so Nizar encounters no students until he opens the door and steps into the Entrance Hall. Even then, it’s just a harried batch running into the Great Hall for dinner.

Hogwarts is directing his attention to the Headmaster’s office, so that’s where Nizar goes. Galfridus opens the doorway after receiving a good scratch behind his ears.

Nizar rides the moving stairwell up while thinking on what to tell anyone who demands to know why he left the school in the middle of the day—aside from the obvious fact that he is a bloody adult and can do what he likes, thank you. Telling everyone that Salazar is alive would delight one Slytherin and panic most of the others, not to mention divert Voldemort’s attention in a way Nizar would prefer to avoid.

He opens the double doors and stops short as he notices the crowd in the room. “I suppose it’s a good thing your office is so large,” Nizar tells Dumbledore. The Headmaster seems relieved to see him before he immediately hides it behind that blasted twinkling. Nizar is just glad that the man’s robes are a soothing silvery blue, which holds a lovely palette of colors instead of an eyesore.

“We do not exactly have professors leaping out of windows every day,” Minerva says in a dry tone. “We were trying to discern how to find you when your interesting Patronus arrived with a response to the one Severus sent out.”

Nizar glances at Severus, who is keeping his expression blank and guarded. “One: I can’t possibly be the first instructor in this school to know that levitation is a thing, or to jump out of a window. In fact, I know I wasn’t first; that was Godric’s nephew Leoric. Two: it was probably really funny to witness. Three: I did apologize to Mrs. Norris for almost landing on her.”

“Yes, and then you vanished,” Septima Vector says tartly. “Where did you go, Slytherin?”

“London,” Nizar answers, ignoring Septima’s badly hidden accusation of mischief. “Then I went on to Surrey and visited this creepy village named Little Whinging. Then I went back to London again for a drink to wash out the taste of Little Whinging.”

“Why Little Whinging?” Minerva asks. “Though I do agree it is, uh...”

“Creepy,” Filius finishes the statement for her. “That much false perfection just cannot be good for anyone’s constitution.”

Nizar points to the silver-and-bronze device on Dumbledore’s desk, which gains him Dumbledore’s calm attention. “That experiment we did earlier—it pointed to one person in London. Only one.” Nizar then holds up two fingers. “Why did it ignore the two blood-related members of that child’s family still residing in that ugly fucking house in Little Whinging?”

Dumbledore’s eyes widen. “The blood protection is still in place. He’s still alive.”

“Oh for—you *knew* that already!” Nizar retorts. “That part is not news!”

Dumbledore peers over his glasses at Nizar. “If you had questions about Little Whinging, I could have answered them. I tied part of young Harry’s sacrificial protection to the house he dwelled in.”

Nizar opens his mouth and closes it several times before he can find vocabulary that isn’t appalled sputtering. “You—you altered the sacrificial magic?”

“Not as such—”

“YOU ANCHORED PART OF IT TO A PHYSICAL ADDRESS!” Nizar shouts in outrage. “HOW IS THAT NOT ALTERING THE MAGIC?”

“It created a necessary sanctuary,” Dumbledore explains, a serious and set expression on his face.

“The hell it did!” Nizar realizes his mouth is hanging open. “Potter didn’t need a physical sanctuary because he literally carried it with him at all times—”

Nizar snaps his mouth shut. “No. I am not yelling at a magician over a century old about why you do *not* fuck with sacrificial magic, especially since you’re bloody well dishonoring the person who did the sacrificing—fuck this; I’m going to dinner,” he announces, spinning on his heel to slam his way back out of the office.

Fuck, fuck, and more fuck. He really needs to study up on modern crude language. He needs more words than just a dormitory teenager’s favorite byword.

“Professor!” Nizar stops in the hallway before the riser that climbs back up into the Entrance Hall and glances over his shoulder to find Miss Granger and Miss Weasley joining him. “You’re back!” Granger exclaims, smiling.

“Hello. How many people know that I dove out of a window today?” Nizar asks, manufacturing a smile for their benefit.

“Pretty much everyone. They make brooms for that, you know,” Miss Weasley says with a playful smirk.

“I’m aware. I got overly excited about an idea and people were in my way...and, well, the window was right there.”

“Are you certain you’re a Slytherin?” Granger asks, quirking an eyebrow. “That sounds like a Gryffindor or a Ravenclaw, to be honest.”

“What time is it?” Nizar asks instead of answering right away.

“Six-thirty, sir,” Miss Weasley answers. “We still have plenty of time for dinner, Professor.”

Nizar lets the two students precede him into the Great Hall. “Miss Granger, I was the first and worst Hat-stall of Hogwarts. Rowena Ravenclaw had to remove that Hat from my head before it started to weep in despair. However, yes, I’m certain I’m a Slytherin, as my brother most certainly counted as one.”

Miss Weasley giggles; Granger merely looks intrigued. Nizar still wonders why the Hat didn’t put her in Ravenclaw. Perhaps it detected plenty of knowledge and decided to hone other aspects, and thus was actually doing its damned job.

The Weasley twins stand up and slap Nizar’s raised hand when he walks by their place at the Gryffindor table. “Excellent falling skills, Professor!” Fred declares.

“On a scale of zero to ten, we give it an eleven for you not crashing into the ground,” George adds.

Nizar doesn’t have to force another smile. “I do hope someone took pictures,” he says. Even Ron Weasley looks amused instead of putting on another round of sputtering offence. Nizar has come to like all of the Weasleys, including their parents, who have started sending him an owl every few days to ask questions of their children’s education (Molly) or to ask very well-worded questions about Hogwarts’ early years (Arthur). Those two got through the old cursed Defence classroom with finely honed skills and Os on their Defence N.E.W.T.s, and one doesn’t do so by being weak-willed or gullible.

Since most of the staff was in a panicked cluster in Dumbledore’s office, Nizar is one of the only teachers to make it to the staff table aside from Barnaby, Sasha, Rubeus, and Argus. He considers it a moment before taking a seat next to Rubeus, one of the few people he doesn’t have much opportunity to speak with.

“I’m surprised you weren’t up there clucking along with all of the other biddies.” Nizar knows why Argus, Barnaby, and Sasha didn’t bother. Argus doesn’t like him, Barnaby barely removes himself from his music room, and Sasha considers eccentricities to be normal and expected. Nizar does like artistic practicality, and Sasha still adores him for providing her with one-thousand-year-old fabric scraps from the East.

Rubeus chuckles. “Any wizard in Hogwarts what lands on the ground, takes the time to apologize to Mrs. Norris, and then Apparates? They’re fine. Bit mental, like, but otherwise doing exactly as they intended. That lot still worries a bit about losing track of you.”

“Divided loyalties?” Nizar asks, selecting bread, meat, and a vegetable he *still* can’t identify, but he likes it well enough as long as there is butter available.

“Nah, not that. S’more like they’re worried about losing a museum piece, ’cept you’re not a museum piece. You’re a person,” Rubeus says with a practical air. “They’ll get used to the notion eventually, Nizar, you’ll see.”

Nizar gives him a sincere smile. “You’re a wise man, Rubeus Hagrid.”

“Nah, not me,” Rubeus protests, but the upper half of his face turns bright red at the compliment.

“To be fair, I didn’t intend to fall the first storey,” Nizar says as the other teachers finally arrive. Half of them are glaring at Nizar, as if it’s his fault they chose to hover in an office and panic over nothing. “I forgot how to levitate until it became necessary to avoid breaking my legs.”

“Nice! You think you might could teach me the trick of that?” Rubeus asks. “Everyone else who can do that levitation bit claims I’m too big, an’ gravity would be too fond of me.”

“People in the twentieth century are daft,” Nizar mutters. “What does either of those have to do with anything?”

“Mayhap they’re worried about the giant part.” Rubeus pats his face with an oversized napkin.

“Nonsense. You can levitate a giant just fine. You don’t necessarily want to drop one unexpectedly, though. Godric learned that the hard way.” Nizar smiles in remembrance. “Nobody in the Highlands needed that particular earthquake.”

“Truth is, a bit of it is that dogged rumor about Salazar Slytherin being a Dark Wizard like You-Know-Who,” Rubeus says in a quieter voice. “Paintin’ you with the same brush, they are, though all your students know better already. Anyone who fights somethin’ fierce to make sure they’re educated—that’s not anything like You-Know-Who would bother with. Now, ol’ Severus, he does a much better job of impersonating a Dark Wizard.”

Nizar takes the teapot in relief when the elves realize he’s sitting in the wrong spot and bring him one. “In my time, there was no such thing as a Dark magician, Rubeus. None of us cared much about light or dark magic, or even really made those distinctions. Our concern was in getting rid of the rotten sort who went around murdering and torturing others for fun. As long as you behaved yourself, the old Council wasn’t concerned.”

Rubeus nods. “Sounds sensible, like.”

“According to your Ministry, they would probably consider me Dark,” Nizar adds. “Short-sighted imbeciles.”

“Aye, they can be.” Rubeus’s voice gets even quieter, faint even for him. “The Ministry thought me guilty of opening your brother’s chamber, just because I had a pet Acromantula. Convenient of them to forget that Acromantulas can’t kill someone just by lookin’ at them.”

“Daft,” Nizar repeats. “Why did they think that?”

“Got set up by that Tom Riddle bloke. He needed cover, see, even though we didn’t know ’til much later that he was the one what killed poor Myrtle.”

Nizar scowls. “Daaaaaaaafffffft,” he drags out, which makes Rubeus chuckle. “I can try to teach you how to levitate, or to fly if you pick up on the magic well enough, but I make no guarantees about flying. It’s difficult to learn. Usually only a handful of magic-workers per generation figure out true flight, and they tend to start young.”

“Did you?” Rubeus asks, spearing an entire potato at once.

Nizar tries not to sigh. “I don’t recall, but I also know that I don’t fly unless brooms are involved. I can only levitate, Rubeus.”

“You should come out and have tea w’myself and Fang at some point. Some of the students do, but it’s been a bit lonelier since everyone, er, ‘misplaced’ young Harry.”

Nizar glances up at him, not needing to hide his surprise. “Were you friends, then?”

“Some days I’m pretty sure I was his first friend.” Rubeus wipes at one eye with his dinner napkin. “Not like Harry’d ever admit it, the tiny lil’ bloke. Too tough for that. Still, it’d be nice to have a bit more company.”

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Nizar falls back on manners in self-defence. “Tea is fine, but I’m bringing the biscuits.”

“What’s wrong with mine?” Rubeus wants to know, brows drawing together.

“Nothing?” Nizar answers in confusion. “It’s a Slytherin thing. A trade. Or in this case, it’s a gift of hospitality offered for the same.”

“Oh.” Rubeus thinks about it. “What are we tradin’ potential levitating lessons for, then?”

Nizar smiles. “Nothing comes to mind, but when I think of something, I promise it will be legal.”

“Yeah, uh...I once traded a bloke for a dragon’s egg. Was going to raise it in my cabin, see,” Rubeus confides.

Nizar stares at him. “Let me rephrase my offer: it will be something *sensible*,” he says, and Rubeus chuckles again.

When Nizar leaves the Great Hall, Severus is already absent. It's not much of a surprise when Nizar finds Severus leaning against the wall in the seventh floor corridor, waiting for him.

"Good evening?" Nizar is still concerned by the flat expression on Severus's face.

"Now that I know you aren't potentially expiring in a field somewhere in Britain? Yes, it is," Severus replies. "That was a very Gryffindor stunt today."

Gryffindor. Nizar feels his heart lodge itself in his throat. "Come inside, please. There's something we need to discuss."

* * * *

"Why did you leave Hogwarts in a panic?" Severus asks the moment the door is closed behind them.

Nizar gives him a fond look that is almost—almost—disguising some other emotion lingering beneath. "You would be the one to recognize that as panic and not excitement."

"The only other time I've ever seen you act similarly to that stunt with the bloody window is during dueling practice." Severus studies Nizar's hands, which have a faint tremor that he hid throughout dinner. "What happened?"

"Several things. Hold on a moment." Nizar walks over to the wall and places his hand on the stone. "Minerva!"

Severus raises both eyebrows when he can hear an echo of Minerva's voice, as if she's standing on the other side of the wall. "Nizar, what is it? I'm trying to grade some truly atrocious Transfiguration essays."

"You have two lions in your Common Room who are threatening to eat each other, and not in that pleasant way we all pretend we aren't aware of," Nizar answers.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Thank you for telling me."

"Just let me tie you into the castle's magic so this can be your job!" Nizar calls back, looking desperate. "Then I'd only be down to Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff instead of worrying about all bloody three of you!"

"Severus allowed you to do so?" Minerva sounds surprised. Severus rolls his eyes.

"Severus isn't an idiot." Nizar winces. "Best hurry—someone just lost a tooth."

"Oh, botheration!" Minerva snarls. Nizar yanks his hand away from the wall before she has the chance to resort to Scots Gaelic.

Severus shakes his head. “The others have not allowed you to give them the means to do their jobs more effectively.”

“I’m foreign and terrifying, though I think Minerva is close to agreeing. Perhaps after the winter holiday. Oh, and Rubeus wants me to teach him how to fly.”

“I actually thought you could not outperform your leap from that window,” Severus says after a moment of stunned silence. “Congratulations; you managed to do so with a single sentence.”

Nizar gives him a strained smile. “I live to prove people incorrect.”

Severus reaches out and pulls a twig from Nizar’s hair. “Were you attempting to accomplish a bird’s nest?”

“No, I was trying not to land on a cat,” Nizar replies. “It’s rude.”

“And you’re being evasive,” Severus counters. “What’s wrong?”

Nizar crosses his arms and clasps his elbows with his hands. “Severus, have I ever lied to you?”

Severus frowns, confused by the odd nature of the question—or more accurately, the timing of it. “You’ve conveniently *omitted* things, but you’ve always answered every question I’ve asked truthfully. Why?”

“Because that is about to become very, very important,” Nizar murmurs. “And I don’t know if it will be enough.”

The hell with confusion; now Severus is concerned. “Nizar.”

“Salazar is alive.” The expression on Nizar’s face is wide-eyed grief and fierce longing.

Severus’s first instinct is to claim that impossible, but he’s dealing with a man who was trapped in a painting for almost a thousand years. “How?”

Nizar lets out a brief, humorless laugh. “Brilliant stupidity, but that was often his way when he couldn’t find other solutions that fit his idea of what should be done.”

“It wasn’t a fucking Horcrux, was it?”

“No!” Nizar looks disturbed by the question. “No, absolutely not. He has more than one reason to find that an unforgivable act. No, this was a different sort of brilliant stupidity, and the only person he harmed with it was himself. *Idiota.*”

“Then why are you still upset? If—” No, there is no *if*. Nizar is too perturbed for this to be some willful hallucination. Severus doubts it would even occur to the man that pleasant hallucinations are possible. “You should be happy, and you’re not.”

“I *am* happy about that, even if I’m worried about my brother. I don’t even know how to easily find him yet beyond flinging a Patronus in his direction. Wait here.” Nizar goes into the back hallway, turning the corner into the room he uses for storage. When he comes back, he’s holding a scroll with a green and broken wax seal.

“I read this for the first time a bit before three-thirty this afternoon. Today.” Nizar passes it to Severus. “Its contents are why I’m fucking panicking.”

Severus brushes his thumb over the wax seal, the original emblem for Deslizarse that Nizar showed him. It isn’t a stylized serpent shaped like an *S*, like Slytherin House’s emblem, but a great horned basilisk placed before the blossoming branches of a rowan tree—a crest meant to represent defence against evil. “I won’t be able to read this scroll, Nizar.”

Nizar clenches his jaw. “Trust me; that won’t be a problem.”

Severus unrolls the scroll while Nizar seats himself on the sofa. His eyebrows rise as he reads the letter’s opening. “You decided to talk to yourself.”

“Apparently.”

“And you used your title,” Severus notes, and is not reassured when Nizar ignores the jibe. “Nizar?”

“I don’t remember writing it,” Nizar whispers, staring down at the rug on the floor. “I don’t remember anything that letter speaks of.”

Severus gives him one more look of concern before he glances at the letter’s opening, surprised to find that except for a few archaic misspellings, it’s in perfectly legible modern English. He reads the letter through; then, with a growing sense of uneasy disbelief, he reads it again.

Two things stand out to him in clarity so sharp and accusatory it might as well be a shout:

Time is a circle.

Salazar Fernan de Casa de Deslizarse met you for the first time in March of 990. You, on the other hand, met Salazar for the very first time on 31st Iulius, 1995.

“Thirty-first July, 1995.” Severus isn’t sure if his voice is harsh in shock or anger.

Nizar nods. “That is what it says.”

“Dammit, Nizar! This is not a time for partial truths!”

Nizar clasps his hands together, but doesn’t lift his gaze from the floor. “You’re holding the only answers I have. What else am I meant to say?”

“That you’re Harry James Potter,” Severus grates out.

“I can’t. I literally can’t say that,” Nizar says in a low voice. “The letter isn’t exaggerating about the adoption contract.”

Severus puts the scroll onto the table. If he doesn’t release it, he’s going to destroy it by accident with magic, or rend it to pieces with his hands. “And changing your appearance?”

Nizar frowns. “From what? This is what I’ve looked like for my entire life!”

“Not your *entire* life,” Severus grates out. “You’re a Metamorphmagus!”

“Yes, I am—one who doesn’t bother to change his bloody appearance unless I need to! I didn’t even know what that child looked like until last week!”

“You read the *Daily Prophet*, Nizar,” Severus retorts. “You’ve seen Potter’s photograph!”

“Oh, yes.” Nizar rolls his eyes. “Moving, black-and-white photos of a child trying desperately not to be looked at. That’s very helpful. I—” He cuts off whatever he was going to say. “Severus. The moment I discovered this, beyond the need to find out what the hell Salazar did with himself, I showed it to you. I believe you deserve to know. I would appreciate it, however, if you told no one else.”

“Why would I agree to such a thing?” Severus asks.

Nizar glances up at him. If Severus expected anger or disappointment, he receives neither. Instead, there is only guarded watchfulness. “Oh. No, I suppose you have no reason to agree to that.”

Severus clenches his jaw against things he wants to say that he might later have cause to regret. Until he figures out what the hell is going on inside his own head, he feels a desperate need for distance. “I need to think on this. I’ll show myself out.”

“Of course,” Nizar says in a quiet voice. “Whatever you need to do.”

Severus ignores the stairs, and Albus’s irritating verbal hints about the Anti-Apparition wards existing for a reason, Apparating straight down to his quarters. He stands in place, drawing in breaths that feel painful, before he gets out his wand and obliterates the table in his sitting room. Then he sits down in a chair and stares at the shattered wooden remains until both the candles and the fire in the fireplace burn low.

* * * *

“What are you going to do?” Galiena asks. Her eyes follow him as he walks from the front door to the rear hall, but she’s not moving beyond the bounds of her portrait frame.

Nizar puts down the armload of books in his study and returns to the sitting room. “Kill Voldemort. Finish out the term in June. Go see the rest of the world, I suppose.”

“Can we go with you?” Brice asks. “It would be nice to see something aside from the inside of this castle.”

“*You’re a portrait, genius,*” Elfric hisses at him.

Brice shrugs. “*So?*”

“I wouldn’t mind the company.” Nizar gets another load of books from his office. When he comes back, Galiena is giving him a careful stare. “What?”

“Are you certain you’re not...”

“Overreacting?” Nizar asks, and Galiena nods. “Yes and no, dearest. I am *planning*, else I’m going to have an emotional reaction that I can’t afford right now.”

“A Slytherin who says they have no reason to agree to the request of a loved one is a Slytherin who thinks of them that way no longer,” Brice says quietly.

Nizar lets out an unsteady breath before nodding. “Exactly. Hence, occupying my hands and my mind. Fortunately, I’ve just been given a lot of grading to do. I expect to receive the last eighty-odd essays by Friday.”

“Yes, but...it’s Severus,” Galiena tries again.

“It is,” Nizar agrees. “And he has always said exactly what he truly feels.”

“*Not always,*” Elfric counters in Parseltongue. “*Not when he’s angry.*”

“I think this situation is quite a bit different.” Nizar finds himself looking at the fireplace in consternation. The jar of Floo powder is cracked down the middle. It’s spilling the green dust in a steady trickle from the shelf to the hearthstones, where Kanza is giving the growing pile of powder a look of irritated offence. Nizar has no idea when that happened, but he must have caused it. “Besides, it is apparently something of a family tradition that my bloodline draws the worst of his ire, isn’t it?”

He goes to bed that night and curls up on his side, staring into the darkness. He’s not really surprised to find that he can’t sleep at all.

* * * *

Severus arrives late to breakfast the next morning after a fitful night’s rest. He learns through the gossiping biddies at the table that Nizar was the first to the table that morning, and the first to leave.

“I don’t think that man sleeps at all.” Filius doesn’t sound as cheerful as he normally does, and he’s a God-awful morning person.

“Serpents don’t sleep the way the rest of us do,” Septima mutters, and Eustas makes a vague noise of agreement.

“Septima!” Minerva barks, but Severus gets up and leaves the table. He doesn’t have the patience for that attitude even when he has slept well. Today he might well hex her out of existence.

Nizar isn’t at lunch, which Severus finds supremely irritating. His mood is sour enough that he suspects Nizar is avoiding him, even though Nizar’s appearance at mealtimes was erratic to begin with.

The man’s absence at dinner is enough to make Severus chew through his fucking silverware. Instead, he chooses to listen, especially to the chatter coming from the student tables. If he’s angry, then they look...worried.

Severus mentally reviews Wednesday’s Defence schedule: fifth-year and third-year Slytherins and Gryffindors; fourth-year and first-year Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The latter two groups are talking quietly amongst themselves, but the Slytherins and Gryffindors are being more proactive.

When the hell did his Slytherins start conspiring with the Gryffindors? Severus scans the tables, frowning. It isn’t all of his students, not by a long shot, but the perpetrators *are* those to whom he tends to ascribe higher levels of intelligence.

“Something’s wrong,” Malfoy announces first, to Severus’s surprise. He’s sitting with Zabini, Vaisey, Bulstrode, Parkinson, the Greengrass sisters, Newbourne, Kartik, Takagi, and Sibazaki. There is another cluster of Gryffindors turned in their seats to look at the Slytherins—Thomas, Weasley, Longbottom, Finnigan, Granger, Parvati Patil, Shafiq, Black, Suri, Mohammad, and Vane.

“You think it’s related to the stunt with the window yesterday?” Longbottom asks.

Malfoy doesn’t disdain the question or the asker, which is intriguing. “I don’t know what else it could be.”

“It was a bit out of character,” Bulstrode says thoughtfully. “Well—outside of the classroom, I mean.”

“Perfectly normal within class,” Finnigan agrees. “Not so much when we’re not flinging hexes at each other.”

“Luna said something interesting after her class in Defence today.” Black winces when there is derision from both Houses.

“What does Loony Lovegood have to say, Black?” Vane asks, and Newbourne cackles in agreement.

Black glares at them. “Look, I know you guys don’t like her, but Luna is *weird*, not stupid.”

“Fair enough, Black.” Parkinson glares at the others until they stop laughing. “What did Lovegood say?”

“Luna says that Professor Slytherin is *sad*,” Black says, which gives Severus a cold, unsettling feeling between his shoulder blades. “I said that’s not anything unusual.”

Granger nods. “He does have a lot of reasons to feel that way.”

“You will not find me climbing into a bloody painting,” Weasley says. “Not willingly, at any rate.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if everyone I knew and loved was dead,” Astoria whispers.

“Yes, well, he has *us*,” Zabini says firmly. “That being the case, *we* need to figure out what to do about it.”

“We’ve already had our last class with Professor Slytherin before the holiday,” Patil says. “Short of Imperiusing the man to get him to talk…”

“Fred and George say that doesn’t work, anyway,” Weasley cuts in. “Slytherin just laughs it off. Too bad *he* couldn’t have been dealing with our Death Eater teacher last term.”

He was, Severus reflects bitterly. Potter had also been the only student in the entire bloody school to throw off the Imperius Curse. The Dark Lord hadn’t been successful when he tried it, either. Some habits, it seems, set themselves early.

“Okay, guys!” Black blushes at raising his voice, but presses on when he has their attention. “Luna says that this was a *different* sad.”

“There are different kinds of sad?” Vaisey asks, baffled.

Daphne rolls her eyes. “Yes, you idiot.”

“Maybe we could get him something for Christmas?” Takagi suggests doubtfully.

Mohammad gives Takagi a narrow-eyed look. “You’re assuming he celebrates Christmas. Some of us have different holidays, dingbat.”

“Solstice,” Granger says. “That one is far more likely to be accurate. The Basques, the Britons, and the Picts—”

“History later, Granger,” Malfoy interrupts, smirking. “The problem is that the Solstice is on bloody *Friday*.”

“Expedited Owl Post?” Thomas shakes his head. “Even if we had the money—shut up, Malfoy—what do you get a Slytherin with a basilisk?”

Severus pushes his chair back and leaves the table. “Where are you going?” Minerva asks.

“I have grading to do,” he answers curtly, and exits through the rear stairwell doorway.

Once he returns to his office, Severus finds that he doesn't have the concentration to sit down and grade pre-holiday essays from dunderheads. That's what he gets for grading the N.E.W.T. classwork first; now he's left with the dubious wisdom from first-years, second-years, and third-years. Thank God for Takagi, Sibazaki, and Astoria Greengrass—though if he is honest, Natalia Ollivander and Rebecca Goldstein of Ravenclaw, Black, Mohammad, and Suri of Gryffindor, and Joy Stivers and Johnathan Holmes of Hufflepuff are showing promise.

Nizar's words surface in his thoughts: *I refuse to teach children how to become easily slaughtered sheep.*

Severus sits down in his chair, seething. It's been twenty-four hours, and he still has no idea what to make of that damned scroll. He wishes Nizar hadn't showed it to him, or even better, had burnt the fucking thing to ash.

That wouldn't solve the problem. He'd be even angrier if he'd found out after weeks or months later rather than a few hours. Nizar had shown Severus words written nine hundred seventy-eight years ago while he was himself still panicking about the truths they revealed.

You're weird.

I'm a Slytherin, and so are you. That means you are also, by association, what?

Shut up.

Severus knows better—he does—but he still wants to believe that it was nothing but a game. That it was all the past years had ever been, a ploy he'd fallen for, allowing himself to believe that it was true friendship.

Why do you hate this child so much?

Because he is everything that was terrible about his father!

The sins are passed from one generation to the next, then? The Christians of my time preached such, but I don't think this is what they meant, Severus.

Severus has no fucking idea what to do with this knowledge. He's ranted to the very same man about the child he'd once been...that Nizar doesn't remember being.

James Potter has been dead since 1981. Even when Severus desperately wanted to think otherwise, Harry Potter never once acted like his father.

I'm a chronic insomniac, Severus, but I appreciate the offer.

He'd caught that brat out of bed countless times roaming Hogwarts' halls, and always assumed mischief. Never once did Severus consider the idea that Potter was wandering around the school because he couldn't sleep.

I didn't know Salazar Slytherin had a brother!

I imagine there is a lot about Salazar that no one knows, chooses to remember, or wishes to discuss at all.

Severus spends half the night awake in his office, trying to come to terms with Harry James Potter and Nizar Hariwalt Slytherin. He doesn't accomplish much more than the bemused realization that they're both complete lunatics.

"Severus. Is all well?" Dumbledore asks him at breakfast the next morning.

"No," Severus growls back, taking a seat and reaching for the coffee. He is growing to understand Nizar's intense loathing of morning, especially if it's preceded by such unwanted fucking introspection for most of the damned night.

"Did you not sleep?" Minerva asks gently.

"That's a stupid question."

"You aren't the only one." Minerva gestures in the direction of the doors, where Nizar is walking in. He appears fine, and responds to the students awake enough to greet him, but even at a distance Severus can tell that something is off.

By the time Nizar makes it to the table, Minerva is gazing at him in open concern. "Poppy has Dreamless Sleep, Nizar. You simply must indulge for a night."

Severus doesn't think that's the only problem. There is a hint of bruising under his eyes that speaks of restless nights, but Severus had no idea how much of his personality Nizar allowed to brighten his eyes until he's utterly buried it. The difference is so startling that it's like looking at a stranger.

"My dear boy, are you all right?" Dumbledore asks. "And yes, I am aware of the foolish nature of asking someone many centuries my senior such a question, but the sentiment remains."

Nizar looks puzzled for a moment. "Oh—I'm fine. I was sorting through ancient correspondence earlier this week and stumbled over some...startling news, something I'd forgotten about. I didn't expect it, but I'll no doubt get over it."

"Grief is not so easily abandoned, I think," Dumbledore says. Nizar gives him a brief nod of acknowledgement before he sits down between Minerva and Aurora.

"Good morning," Aurora offers.

"No, it is not," Nizar retorts, reaching for the tea. That is normal enough that Severus almost smiles.

"Always wait until after the caffeine, Aurora. I've warned you time and time again regarding myself, and he shares that trait," Minerva says dryly.

Nizar lingers long enough to drain a teapot and bicker with Minerva over the nature of toast before he gets up to leave. Severus resists the urge to follow; he's been watching his

Slytherins, who look far more circumspect than usual. Severus desperately hopes he was not that transparent as a child.

Nizar makes it past the tables before Malfoy stands up. “Excuse me! Professor?” As if that’s a signal, a decent portion of the student body stands as well. Malfoy, Zabini, Vaisey, Bulstrode, Parkinson, the Greengrass sisters, Sibazaki, Takagi, Newbourne, Kartik, Finnigan, Thomas, Granger, Longbottom, Weasley, Parvati Patil, Shafiq, Mohammad, Suri, and Vane, yesterday’s conspirators, are on their feet. They’ve been joined by Lovegood, Miss Weasley and her twin brothers, Bainbridge, Baddock, Kubo, and every student in Nizar’s N.E.W.T. classes.

“We need to discuss something with you, Professor,” Miss Parangyo says.

Nizar lifts an eyebrow as the large group approaches. “A mutiny?”

“No, that’s for after the winter holiday, sir,” Gupta says in an innocent voice.

“Granger is the one who figured you probably celebrated the Solstice.” Jordan slings his arm over Granger’s shoulders while she blushes.

“Well...not in a long time, but yes, close enough,” Nizar says. “I’m pretty sure that’s tomorrow, though.”

“Most of us are going to be panicking about last-minute schoolwork tomorrow, sir,” Fleet says.

Fred Weasley reaches over and whaps Fleet in the head. “Speak for yourself, man.”

“But the others will be busy, so we’re doing this today,” George says.

Bulstrode plucks something out of Malfoy’s hands. “You’re taking too long.” She hands it to Nizar. “That’s why, sir.”

Severus can’t see what the item is, not without an entire horde of students in the way. “A blank book?” Nizar asks.

“Not just *any* blank book,” Black says.

“It’s the sort of blank book you use if you’re going to write a book that can be magically copied, at, say, a printer’s,” Bhatia adds.

“We were all discussing it, see,” Miss Johar explains, “and while we all like our new Defence books a lot better than their predecessors—”

“They’re practically the best textbooks in the school, considering the ones that are second-best are two centuries out of date.” Parvati Patil sounds unimpressed.

Minerva sniffs. “Second-best,” she mutters.

Severus gives her a smug look. “Miss Patil doesn’t mean yours.”

“—none of the texts you gave us are set up for modern printing,” Johar finishes, glaring at the others.

“Anyway!” Miss Bell’s voice cuts through the chatter. “We thought maybe one of those Defence books should go to print and be in a proper bookshop, and we all agreed that Brice’s should be first.”

A Slytherin. Who was he to you?

My son.

“Oh.” Nizar pauses. “No complaints about learning from the words of a Slytherin, then?”

“Everyone used to be from one House or another,” Weasley says, to Severus’s complete astonishment. He didn’t think Ron Weasley would ever attain that sort of maturity. “Besides, Brice deSlizarse was from two of the best.”

“Watch it, Weasley.” Miss Applebee sounds cheerful. “Some of us are really warming to this whole ‘Viking’ thing.”

“Thank you. All of you,” Nizar says, but by the time the students have gone back to their seats or walked on to class, Nizar is missing, too.

“That was a very kind effort, from many wildly different minds,” Filius says in a tone of curiosity.

Minerva leans close to Severus. “Did you know about this?”

“This is why I tell you to pay more attention to your students during meals. They were planning something like this yesterday.”

“Some of us are wise enough to be selectively deaf, Severus,” Minerva replies.

Severus smirks at her before getting up from the table. “And some of us prefer to be well-informed.”

Between three Double sets, a N.E.W.T. class, and a random placement of first-years, Thursday is always a full teaching day for him. He’s glad; it means that he’s too preoccupied by potential mishaps and lethal accidents for his conscience to bother him overly much.

I was very much afraid that I’d pushed too hard. You’re the only person I know, Severus.

His brain abandoned the school years between the fall of 1991 and the summer of 1995 and has resentfully focused on a friendship that runs from the fall of 1971 until now—if Severus hasn’t entirely fucked it all up by being silent when he should not have been.

I do not make friends easily, and I do not discard them lightly.

Severus goes to lunch thinking that hypocrisy suits no one. He despises the trait in himself.

He catches Nizar in the stairwell behind the riser for the staff table. “Nizar.”

Nizar glances over his shoulder, pausing with his hand on the door. “Hello.”

Even with the dim lighting, Severus can tell that he’s still holding himself tightly in check, that no hint of his personality is in his gaze. “Do you have a moment?”

“Unfortunately not. I have so much grading to do,” Nizar says, pushing open the door. Severus frowns and follows him out.

“Grading is usually my excuse,” he says in a low voice, the sound covered up by the din of students rushing into the hall for the meal.

“Excuse? No, I have six hundred seventy-two feet to read.” Nizar glances at the staff table. “I’m surprised I’ve not been mobbed.”

“Why?”

Nizar gives him an odd look. “You’re the one who said you had no reason to agree to my request for silence,” he says, and sits down next to Minerva.

Severus is caught off-guard for one of the very few times in his adult life. *No, you said that*, he thinks in anger...

...but Severus is the one who left Nizar with the impression that it was true. He hadn’t denied it at all.

Fuck! Fuck everything, and then set it all on fucking fire.

Severus ignores most of his lunch in favor of digging out a strip of scrap paper and one of the twins’ Self-inking Quills. He changes the ink to green, then charms the paper so that its words appear and then disappear the moment the message is read by the intended recipient.

A wise man plans on how to survive, not on how to die with the least amount of fuss. “Mitto ad Nizar,” he says under his breath.

A moment later Nizar is catching the scrap of paper before it lands in his tea. He frowns at the words and pens a response, but aims his returning spell a bit better; it simply appears on the table next to Severus’s plate.

I consider it being realistic, Severus reads, scowling. Nizar remembers that conversation, all right.

I will beat you to death with a cauldron for being so bloody defeatist, Severus writes, the words so spiked and close-set it looks like captured rage. “*Revertere ad Nizar sinum scriptor*,” he mutters, and watches in satisfaction as Nizar twitches in place before he digs the paper out of his pocket.

Nizar’s response lands on Severus’s lap when Minerva’s attention is engaged elsewhere. *Is that what you think I’m doing?*

The paper is starting to look worn from so many messages written across the same small area. *Yes*. Severus underlines that twice. *I'm terrified that it's exactly what you're doing. You fight for everything else. Why not this?* He's tempted to add, *Why not me?* but that's both too mindful of an awful Country-Western song from the States, and too fucking pathetic.

The response lands on his plate, which earns him a raised eyebrow from Minerva. Severus glares at her until she rolls her eyes and ignores him again.

I don't know how.

That is such a baffling answer that Severus forgets to write anything else. He goes back to class and deals with a disastrous load of fourth-years in back-to-back Double sets. Afterwards, Severus skips dinner and sits in his quarters, dwelling on Nizar's last response. He knows the answer is before him, and that it's likely obvious. He just can't *see* it.

"James Potter trusted adults to have his back," Severus murmurs, remembering Nizar's words on the matter during Potter's first year. Severus remembers how appalled he'd been at the time to realize that young Potter regarded adults as untrustworthy entities, a habit Severus still hasn't grown past—but then, he trusts perhaps three people on this entire planet.

Potter isn't Nizar—biologically they're the same, yes, but one was a fourteen-year-old child when Severus last saw him. The other is a man who is literally over a thousand years old, one who has, from the first moment they met, embodied the greatest traits of Severus's House.

However: Potter literally put himself between another student and danger, more than once. Severus heard that child voice concern for others, and ask for *help* for others. Not once did he ever ask anything for himself, even when it would have been expected. He didn't even whinge about a detention unless he was doing so on someone else's behalf.

Lingering stubbornness, perhaps? Severus wonders.

No, not stubbornness. Not a character flaw, either. Severus has watched over children from abusive households during his tenure of Head of Slytherin House. This resembles an aspect of the self that was probably broken in childhood. If not in 1981, then Severus imagines the Dursleys were more than willing to stomp the idea of self-preservation out of their only nephew.

Severus gets up and approaches the small painting he added to the mantelpiece, that of a dark-haired, dark-eyed wizard in patchwork leather robes. He doesn't like having a bloody portrait in his home, but he needed a messenger. "Find a version of Salazar Slytherin that does *not* dwell within the Entrance Hall. Tell him I'd like to speak with him, please."

The mute wizard nods and vanishes from his frame. Severus waits, watching the hands on his clock tick away three minutes, before the portrait returns with the version of Salazar Slytherin from the Slytherin Common Room.

"Oh, now what's that expression for?" Slytherin asks, giving Severus an unimpressed look. "Did one of your young ones break something?"

“It’s about your brother.”

Slytherin frowns. “What did *he* break?”

Severus grits his teeth. “He’s not the one who did the breaking, and I need to fix it.”

“Oh, gods, you’re both idiots,” Slytherin mutters, plastering his hand over his face. “Go on, then.”

“How difficult did your brother find it to ask for things for himself?”

Slytherin snorts out a laugh. “He’d sooner peel off all of his own fingernails.”

Severus tries not to sigh. “I thought as much. How difficult would it be to *encourage* him to ask?”

Slytherin peers at him through his separated fingers. “Severus, it would be easier to expect one man’s bladder to piss out the entirety of a forest fire.”

“It never got any better, did it?” Severus is thinking of a portrait’s inability to ask him to stay in 1977. Asking people like Regulus Black not to go after Voldemort was a benefit to Regulus alone; asking Severus was also a desire of the self.

“Showed you the scroll, did he?” Slytherin waits for Severus to nod. “No. No, it did not. It’s been a thousand years, and Helga still fantasizes about murdering your Headmaster.”

Severus frowns. “For?”

“For inflicting that charming family on Nizar, among other things,” Slytherin replies. “If you’re hoping Nizar will repair a mess that you made—”

“No,” Severus interrupts at once. “I’m simply trying to understand it. I’m not very good at this, either.”

“If you’re willing to learn, you’re already far better at it than most. Last question, Severus,” Slytherin says.

“Do you really think of that man as your brother?” Severus asks.

A less patient man would have left in disgust. Slytherin just seems amused. “Legally and magically, Nizar *is* my brother...but even without binding magic? Severus, I loved him from the moment I met him. I’d have claimed him as my brother even if magic had never once been involved.” Then he vanishes from the frame, leaving the mute, patchwork wizard behind.

Severus gets out a quill and another piece of paper. “*When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more, nor less.*”

He is rewarded by a return of the paper in less than a minute, covered in Nizar’s very large and expressive response. *OH MY GODS, YOU DID NOT JUST REFERENCE THAT*

FUCKING TRAVESTY!

Maybe he hasn't entirely fucked up, after all.

Severus smiles before he sends the paper back. *"The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things."*

The paper pops back into the room and even manages to float indignantly. *FINE*, Nizar's writing declares. *"There are so many advantages in it, that one's memory works both ways."*

Severus has to go find the damned book to finish responding. *"I'm sure mine only works one way. I can't remember things before they happen."*

FUCK, NEITHER CAN I.

Severus laughs before reaching over to the tarot deck, lifting the top card and dropping it onto the table. Balm of Gilead. For once his knowledge fails him; he remembers that, much like the addition of ground unicorn horn, Balm of Gilead adds or increases the magical potency of a potion, but little else.

Balm of Gilead, Severus writes. *What does it do?*

Last bit before I have to go back to grading. For February, I'm giving the blighters extra credit if they turn in an essay two weeks early, Nizar replies. *Balm of Gilead – herb of protection, healer of the soul, mender of broken hearts. Cures fucking love potions and defends against Tempero. Bloody Church nearly drove it into extinction when they got it into their heads that it was a protector against everything, but it's not. It's far more useful for spiritual and mental pains.*

Interesting. Severus taps his finger against his quill and writes one more response. *Can I see you tomorrow morning? After breakfast?*

Didn't I say last bit? Didn't I? Nizar writes with exasperated quill-strokes. *"Contrariwise, if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."*

"Lewis Carroll, you complete fucking Ravenclaw," Severus mutters. "I hope that says yes."

Severus is just drifting off to sleep after midnight when a lancing pain in his arm sends him scrambling upright. Dammit, not again.

He gets dressed in clothes he just discarded, swearing under his breath, and goes out to the sitting room to put his boots back on. The Balm of Gilead card is still lying upright where he left it.

Severus traces the fine detail of the plant and considers, once again, that he's an idiot. The amount of time, effort, and detail that went into the creation of these cards would have answered every question he had if he'd given them a thought. The robe was a fine gift, but even if Severus had truly held the Divinatory ability of a rubbish bin, the cards are a measure of how well Nizar understands him.

Why not? Severus draws three random cards from the deck. *It can't be any less enlightening than Lewis Carroll.*

He turns them over and bites back a grimace. Yes, it can actually be worse than an absinthe-imbibing Ravenclaw.

Amanita phalloides, the white Death Cap mushroom. *Datura stramonium*, the Devil's Snare. *Conium maculatum*, commonly known as Poison Hemlock.

"Well, that's auspicious." Severus retrieves a few more potions from his drawer that he normally leaves in his quarters, stuffs them into an inner robe pocket, and gets out the Floo powder.

"Severus," Voldemort greets him when he arrives in Little Hangleton. The parlor is crowded; this isn't just Voldemort's inner circle, but everyone Marked among those whom Voldemort considers his most useful allies.

"My Lord."

"It's time for me to once again greet my ancestor," Voldemort announces. Severus restrains himself to a polite, curious nod of acknowledgement before joining the others.

When Voldemort outlines the plan itself, meant to come to fruition that morning, Severus's blood runs cold. He has no way to leave, no way to send warning. All he can do is hope that Nizar has experience thwarting the literal trap Voldemort has planned.

Familial Blood

Chapter Summary

“Everything dies, even if some things are harder to kill than others.”

The morning of the Winter Solstice, Nizar awakens in a painful twist of limbs. He’s trying to curl in on himself to seek relief, and it isn’t helping. If anything, the pain is quickly increasing to unbearable levels.

Nizar has no idea what’s going on, but he doesn’t have to endure it. He is a mind magic practitioner, and there are ways of dealing with pain. He pushes down his perception of that limb-twisting agony until he can stumble out of bed.

He Apparates down to the hospital wing without giving a damn if he’s seen or not, raiding Poppy Pomfrey’s collection of available painkillers. It requires breaking a jinx on a locked cabinet to get at the truly useful ones; he drinks the first and takes the remaining six, Apparating back to his quarters.

All right. Now he can think.

Nizar closes his eyes. This isn’t some random pain of the body that decided to greet him at age forty-two after ten centuries of delay. This is magic twining around him, and it stinks of blood.

Blood magic. “Fucking prick,” Nizar growls. He strips off his silk pyjamas and dresses in a hurry: black linen shirt, trousers, socks, and boots. Then he selects a robe the color of the midnight sky, one with full-length sleeves. It has no embroidery or trim, but there are a number of protective spells woven into the silken wool blend, more than was typical for the weavers in his time. He’d certainly paid enough for them.

Nizar turns the corner from his bedroom to the storage room and crashes against the doorframe, gritting his teeth as a cresting wave breaks through the painkilling potion’s effectiveness. He snarls and pushes it back down again with mind magic, swallows the contents of another potion phial, then drops to his knees to throw open the storage trunk.

Voldemort is pouring a lot of strength into this spell. He must really want Nizar’s attention.

The fucker has it, and he is not going to like the results. Afterwards, Nizar is going to make certain the walking corpse can never repeat this complete fucking nonsense ever again.

“Nizar? *Hermanito*, what the hell?”

“Your—your idiot great-grandson figured out how to create a familial Blood Summons, Sal.” Nizar draws the seax from the trunk and glares at the sheathed blade. He needs it, but it’s far too obvious as it is. “Filky, Dobby, Tinny, Rubinny—I don’t care, whoever is awake!”

Tinny pops into the room, rubbing his eyes. “What can Tinny be doing for the Professor Slytherin?” He drops his hands and stares at the seax. “Is the Professor Slytherin to be acting as the Protector today?”

“I’ve no idea.” Nizar clenches his jaw when the Summons tries to bubble up and dominate his thoughts. Bugger that; he can resist that nonsense. “I need two yards of plain silk, no wider than the length of my forearm. Please.” Tinny nods and vanishes.

“How does that *idiota* have your blood?” Salazar asks as Godric turns up, scowling.

“He doesn’t. He shouldn’t.” Nizar frowns at the seax. It won’t kill a man with Horcruxes binding him to life, but it will certainly make him suffer. “No, he has the child’s, but he doesn’t know about that connection. He has to be using his own—oh, fuck,” he whispers as Salazar begins swearing.

“What?” Godric asks. “Make sense; I still have no mind for blood magic!”

“If he only used his own blood, I’m not the only one feeling this. Everyone who has any blood connection to Voldemort *and* to Harry James Potter will be Summoned.” Nizar turns to the portraits. “Those behind the blood protections in Surrey should be safe. Does that child have any other relatives, no matter how distant?”

Godric’s brow slowly furrows. “There shouldn’t be, but I’ll look into it,” he says, and vanishes.

Nizar frowns. The answer should have been an immediate denial, but better safe than sorry, he supposes.

“Salazar, I hope you’re in the mood to meet this prick,” Nizar mutters.

“I’ll be in the mood to kill him, more like,” Salazar responds in displeasure.

Helga appears in the frame Godric just vacated. “No matter who it affects, you know this Summons must be a trap.”

Nizar nods in acknowledgement. “Anything Voldemort does is a trap.”

“Helga, come with me,” Salazar orders. “We need to gather Rowena and be certain no one in the other Houses is being affected by this. Nizar—be careful.”

Nizar smiles as Tinny returns with a bundle of plain white silk. “I’m cunning, efficient, and ruthless, Sal.”

“That isn’t the same thing,” Salazar retorts, and vanishes from his frame to follow the others.

Nizar takes the silk from the elf's trembling hands. "Thank you, Tinny. Wake the other elves and check the castle. If there are adults or children who've just awoken in pain, or are convinced that they need to leave Hogwarts, they *must* be kept here. Voldemort is using an unfocused blood Summons. If you find anyone, make sure they're not left alone. If it's a student, also make sure that their Head of House is aware of the problem. I'll end this stupid Summons as soon as possible, but no one can be allowed to leave in the meantime."

"The Professor Slytherin be leaving," Tinny points out in disapproval, watching as Nizar wraps the first loops of silk around his left arm.

"Yes, but I'm trained for dealing with evil magicians like Voldemort." Nizar lays the sheathed blade along his arm and binds it in place with the remaining silk. The Invisibility Charm makes the knife, the silk, and the seax's hilt vanish from sight; another bit of magic modifies the charm so that the feel of the knife and silk vanishes. Anyone searching him, by sight or by touch, will find nothing.

"The house-elves of Hogwarts be worrying, about you," Tinny says.

"Tinny, if I don't end this spell, it will never stop. Ignoring that Summons can break the mind so that there is no recovery, and I won't let that happen. Not to anyone," he says, thinking of Salazar.

Tinny bows low. "Nizar the Protector: Tinny will be telling the others and doing as the Professor Slytherin says. The Professor Slytherin is trusted by Hogwarts."

"Thank you." Nizar rests his fingers on the warm scales over his throat after Tinny Disapparates. "Well, Kanza dearest? Are you ready to go play?"

Kanza flexes under his touch, settling herself more comfortably. "*You have not been the only one keeping score. It will be delightful to slay those who have harmed Severus and our family.*"

"That's my darling girl."

Nizar closes his eyes. The Blood-based Summons is easy to track, and helpful enough to provide him with a destination. He Apparates by the sense of that connection and arrives within a dark, unfamiliar building.

He turns in place, curious. Everything is constructed of sleek, black stone. Someone has a serious love affair with black. Even Severus would find this to be excessive. For Nizar, it's even worse: the light of the torches reflects off every surface, creating a dizzying array of color that makes it almost impossible to distinguish between floor, wall, and ceiling.

The pain of the Summons is less now that he's closer to the origination point, recognizing that its Call is being answered. Other strong magic in these halls considers him an interloper, and is creating an intense and unwelcome bite under his skin.

Nizar puts his hand out until he finds a wall. He uses that slick touch beneath his palm to guide himself forward, following the draw of the Blood Summons.

How does Severus put up with that Summons so often? he thinks, quickly followed by, *I am going to convince that stubborn bastard to let me get rid of the Dark Mark. It isn't worth this.*

Nizar turns the next corner and nearly runs face-first into Arthur Weasley. “Uh—hi?”

“What are you doing here, Nizar?” Arthur asks in a harsh whisper, glancing back over his shoulder.

“My many times removed great-grandnephew is using a familial Blood Summons to get my attention,” Nizar explains. “You need to leave.”

Arthur turns pale. “Voldemort is within the Ministry?”

“That’s where I am?” Nizar is now even less impressed with the building’s design. “Yes, Voldemort is here. I doubt he’s alone. What is this place?”

Arthur grasps his shoulder, looking around as if Voldemort might materialize at any moment. “This is the boundary to the Department of Mysteries. We’ve known Voldemort has been interesting in gaining a copy of the prophecy regarding himself and Harry—”

“Voldemort thinks I can get it for him,” Nizar realizes, and wants to slap his hand over his face. “That will not be happening. You should go find assistance, if there is any assistance to be had.”

Arthur looks concerned when Nizar lets out a pathetic gasp as the Summoning magic surges forth, angry that he’s no longer moving to answer the call. “I can’t just leave you here.”

“You can, and you have to. You are a brilliant man, Arthur, but I’m infinitely more prepared for a fight with that twit than you are—and Voldemort currently wants me alive. He’d consider you a trophy killing.” Nizar pulls out his wand. “Take this. If I’m searched, I don’t want some Death Eater with a fetish for the spoils of war to make off with it.”

Arthur takes Nizar’s cherrywood wand and disappears it up his sleeve. “If you’re certain…”

Nizar smiles, ignoring the incessant prodding from the Blood Summons. “I’m far from helpless, trust me.”

Arthur gives him another searching look before nodding. “Then I’m off to alert the rest of the Order.” He retreats in the correct direction, away from the origin of the Blood Summons.

Nizar keeps his hand on the wall, walking further into the confusing black hellhole of conflicting colors, rainbow haloes on black on reflections of fire upon yet more unceasing black. Perhaps some idiot thought “black” and “mysterious” were supposed to be fucking synonyms. At this point, the only thing defining the space for Nizar is gravity.

The closer he gets to the Summons’ originator, the harder it is to separate the Blood Summons from the magic singing through the building around him. If it weren’t for the direct connection provided by the Summons, Nizar would be effectively, magically blind.

Voldemort chose it on purpose. This much magic thrumming in the air can hide any number of things, and will be as much to Nizar's advantage as it will be Voldemort's.

Nizar is proven correct when he steps onto the origination point—a place on the floor, not a person. He sighs in annoyance as magic symbols around his feet light up, shining with red fire.

“Oh, you're smarter than I've been giving you credit for.” Nizar gives his fingers an experimental wiggle. He isn't frozen, but his feet are bound in place within the fiery symbols of the circular trap. That is useful, and there is another benefit: he found it before Salazar. That should lessen the intensity of the Blood Summons now that the trap has caught itself a blood relative.

Then again, it would be just like that stupid fuck to not know how to limit a Summons.

Voldemort steps out from the junction of the next hallway, and his Death Eaters follow a moment later, moving as one body. The Death Eaters line the corridor on both sides and block the hall at the end, but to Nizar's amusement, none of them come too close to him, or venture near the confines of the magical trap.

They're all dressed in black robes, including Voldemort; the Death Eaters are wearing ornate masks of silver or gold. The torch flame bounces off the metal, adding more damned color to an already nauseating display. If overstimulation of his retinas makes Nizar vomit, he resolves that he's going to do so on Voldemort's bare, corpse-colored feet.

He has, at least, confirmed that Voldemort does not have tetrachromacy. He wouldn't be so at ease in this place, no matter the reptilian traits he adopted from his shoddy resurrection spell.

“Hello, Uncle,” Voldemort says in his rasping wreck of a voice.

“Hello, idiot,” Nizar replies, smiling at Voldemort's brief look of irritation. “You don't appear to be any less corpse-like.”

“My appearance is a small price to pay for immortality,” Voldemort breathes.

Nizar rolls his eyes. “Everything dies, even if some things are harder to kill than others.”

“Perhaps.” Voldemort subjects Nizar to an unblinking stare. “I do apologize that such magic is required for us to speak like this. After our last meeting, I felt the need to be...cautious. I'm sure you understand. A good Slytherin plans for contingencies.”

“You are not a good Slytherin,” Nizar says in a flat, unimpressed voice.

Voldemort smiles. “But I am, Uncle. I am many generations removed, but I am a direct descendent of your own brother.”

“If you wished to be claimed as family, you should have been more fucking polite in 1938.”

“Search him,” Voldemort orders the nearest Death Eater in a bored tone.

A cloaked form a bit shorter than Nizar steps out of the lineup of Death Eaters to his right. When their gloved hands settle onto Nizar's shoulders, he catches a whiff of a well-crafted, flowery perfume. Despite the thorough nature of the weapons search, they still manage to be exceptionally polite. Nizar appreciates that; maybe he'll let this one live.

"He holds no wand, My Lord," a female voice says in surprise. "He doesn't even carry a blade in his boot."

Nizar smiles. "What makes you think I need a wand?" More than a few Death Eaters turn their heads to cautiously regard their fellows.

"It is a threat without substance, Narcissa," Voldemort says in genial reassurance. "He is trapped, exactly as I said he would be."

Narcissa Malfoy. Dammit—Draco needs at least one parent to survive this war. Nizar doesn't want to orphan the young man just as he's learning to be less of a pompous prick. He'd also prefer it if Draco's surviving parent is the intelligent one.

Nizar glances at Narcissa, meets her cool blue eyes, and allows her to see the disappointment lurking in his own. She holds his gaze for a moment before averting her eyes, stepping back into the line of Death Eaters.

"I do find it intriguing that you would come here without a wand." Voldemort is still smiling, the irritating little shit. Nizar is going to wipe that smile off of his face.

"Some of you are known to have thieving hands, and I don't share," Nizar says, watching Voldemort approach at last. Idiot. If Voldemort had faith in his own magic, he wouldn't have asked another to search Nizar for weapons.

He compares what he knew of Tom Riddle in Hogwarts to the tales repeated by Severus in the Common Room, and glances down at the magical trap. Voldemort has knowledge, but lacks true understanding. Useful, that.

"You've placed me at a disadvantage, Uncle. You've given me a dilemma I do not often face." Voldemort draws forth his own wand and regards it like a beloved friend. "You see, there is no one in existence who can defeat me. You will not harm me, Uncle. Not you, and certainly not Harry Potter. Dumbledore's minions are so afraid to lose him to my strength that they have hidden Potter away where he cannot be found."

Nizar lets out a brief laugh. "You fear a fifteen-year-old boy? That's rich."

Voldemort's smile turns into a petulant frown. "I do not."

"Didn't the two of you duel when he was still fourteen?" Nizar grins. "Didn't you *lose*?"

"I do not consider it a loss or a win when one of the duelists retreats before the battle is done," Voldemort counters, and then gestures with his wand.

Nizar lets out a surprised gasp when the magic embedded in the trap suddenly yanks him down to his knees. He thinks—he thinks he recognizes this magic now. Familiarity is teasing

at the back of his thoughts, dancing on the edge of his perception.

Voldemort gives Nizar a magnanimous look. “I know you are wise, Uncle, so I will grant you an opportunity. Retrieve the prophecy regarding myself and Harry Potter from the Hall of Prophecy, and we will part on neutral terms. No harm will come to you from any of my Death Eaters. You have my word.”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve heard other idiots make such ridiculous threats?” Nizar asks snidely. “If you want that prophecy so badly, go get it yourself.”

Voldemort presses the tip of his wand to his lips with an air of regret. “I suspected you would decline, so I planned accordingly.” He lowers his wand and stares down at Nizar. “You have the strength of my family, Nizar Slytherin. It is strength that I will claim for myself.”

It’s the only warning Nizar has before it feels like his very self is being ripped out through his veins. He screams through the initial, shocking burst of agony. Pain sings along his skin like a thousand blades before Nizar clenches his jaw shut against it.

“I thought you were the strongest magician in Britain,” Nizar spits in defiance.

Voldemort seems amused. “I am the most powerful wizard alive.”

“Then you wouldn’t need to steal magic from someone else, would you?” The question causes Voldemort to frown like a petulant child again before he turns away in apparent dismissal.

Fucking vile bastard. Nizar really is going to slice Riddle into tiny pieces, then find the Horcrux tying Voldemort to life and destroy it.

Today, however...today, Nizar will settle for making Voldemort suffer.

He uses agony as fuel, a trick he learned through years of asking Godric to torment him with Cruciatus. It gave him the means to access his magic through whatever pain felled him, and he uses it now to grasp hold of that blood-created thread of connection, stemming the flow of magic Voldemort is taking from him.

Voldemort turns around in surprise. “And what is this?”

“A waiting defeat.” Nizar smiles when he sees the first flicker of doubt in Voldemort’s eyes.

“I think not.” Voldemort grasps at that magical connection and pulls, but does not succeed in breaking Nizar’s hold. “I will be even more than I was, Uncle.”

“No,” Nizar declares softly. “You will be less.” He yanks hard on that blood-bound thread, pulling part of his magic back into his core. Voldemort lets out a shocked gasp, but it’s not enough. That isn’t the only connecting thread.

Nizar studies the spell that binds him to the floor. Now that he holds that first thread, he can see the blood magic that makes up the rest of the trap. The symbol holds the other threads—oh. It’s one of the old Pictish circles, a maze meant to entrap.

It is only a trap if one cannot see it.

Nizar smiles again and yanks on *all* of those lines of connection. Voldemort stumbles forward in surprise before rage makes his eyes glow like ruby fire.

“What are you doing, Uncle?”

Nizar crooks his fingers in a come-hither gesture. “Come closer, and perhaps I’ll tell you.”

“I think not.” Voldemort is letting anger rule his temper, using it to hide his fear. His Death Eaters are starting to shuffle in place, unnerved by Nizar’s smile.

“I’m not giving you a choice.” Nizar keeps pulling on those binding threads, physically dragging Voldemort closer until his bare feet meet the outside edge of the Pictish maze.

“You see...” Nizar climbs to his feet, hearing more than a few startled gasps and murmurs from Voldemort’s faithful. He bares his teeth, causing Voldemort to flinch. “You’re good. I’ll grant you that, Tom Riddle—but you’re not that good.”

Then Nizar takes back all that was stolen from him, all at once.

Voldemort lets out a muffled shriek, his eyes wide with bewildered denial. “STOP!”

“Oh, fuck you!” Nizar shouts back, finally infuriated by Voldemort’s ridiculous behavior and his host of cowardly sycophants. “I won’t stop! In fact, the Christians have this thing about judgement.”

Nizar magically drags Voldemort close enough to be in kissing range, smiling into the man’s slit-pupiled eyes. “An eye for an eye, Tom,” he whispers, and yanks one more time, claiming part of Voldemort’s magical core as his own.

Voldemort staggers, stunned by the sudden loss of part of his own magical core. In that same moment, Nizar pulls the seax free from its hiding place and slices it across Voldemort’s face.

Voldemort howls in pain and rage, reeling backwards to escape Nizar while his hands clutch at his face. The skin of his left cheek is burning away like flakes of black ash as Death Eaters begin to draw their wands. Not much time, then.

Nizar glances down at those lines of connection. Basilisk venom is an excellent tool for working against blood magic; it’s what makes it so useful for destroying inanimate soul jars. He severs every line that binds him to Voldemort via the Blood Summons. Then he drags his knife point through the maze, one side to another, to break the trap.

The moment Nizar’s feet are free, he nearly falls down before finding his balance. His heart is racing. He feels sick, unhealthy, wrong—

Oh. He’s an idiot. He took corrupt magic from Voldemort, and he severed the lines of connection that would allow him to send it right back. He’s going to have to let his own magic overpower and burn through the foul mess. That’s never a pleasant process.

Nizar ignores his pounding heart and points the seax at the closest Death Eater when they step forward. "I really wouldn't. Voldemort is merely suffering. For you, a basilisk-imbued blade would be fatal." He doesn't want to kill anyone here except Voldemort. Most of them were of his brother's House. Nizar knew their faces as children.

Please let him not have to kill any of these idiots. Some of them might change their minds about allying themselves to Voldemort now that they've seen him wounded and weakened.

"*There are other fatal venoms!*" Voldemort roars in Parseltongue. "*Nagini!*"

Nizar tilts his head, looking at a gash on Voldemort's face large enough to reveal his teeth and jaw. "It must be difficult to hiss properly with a hole in the side of your face," he comments, just before his attention is caught by a giant serpent that glides around the corridor junction. It's some sort of non-magical pit viper, but far too large, enhanced by magical means. No serpent but a basilisk should be that big. No wonder Severus found it unnerving.

The giant viper rears up, looking down at Nizar as if he's prey, but Nizar is not impressed. Kanza's mother was much larger.

"*My turn,*" Kanza hisses softly. She unloops herself from Nizar's neck to glide down his black sleeve, an almost invisible line but for her glittering scales. She twines around his hand and wraps her tail around the seax's hilt, using it to rear up to her full height. She is only twenty inches long, but basilisks are deadly from birth.

"*KILL!*" Voldemort orders the viper, holding his hand over his destroyed face.

"I did mention the basilisk, right?" Nizar asks, making certain his voice is loud enough to carry down the hall.

Nagini rears back to strike and then freezes mid-motion as Kanza meets her eyes. Then the fatal, stone-bound Petrification takes hold. The giant serpent topples over and shatters on the floor.

Voldemort's roar of agony is like a living thing, a sound that bores into Nizar's skull like driven spikes. Within his core, something else is screaming, too, recognizing the snake as being a part of itself that is now lost—

Nizar stares at Voldemort in disbelief. "You—you turned a snake into a Horcrux?" he asks, his voice shaking. "Are you fucking *daft*?" He adds in softer Parseltongue: "*Kanza. Hide, please. Don't come out again unless you judge it necessary.*"

"*Very well.*" Kanza is too pleased with herself for Petrifying the Horcrux-Serpent to disobey his request.

"*Thank you.*" Voldemort would only be inconvenienced by a basilisk's stare, but Nizar sees two stone-Petrified Death Eaters, and has no idea who they are. He's terrified of endangering Severus further. No matter what the revelations of that scroll have wrought and damaged, that man is still his friend, and Nizar will not see him perish.

Nizar flinches when other magicians begin Apparating into the room in clusters, but then he recognizes Arthur appearing with Andromeda and another grown ginger; Minerva, Dumbledore, and Filius are standing together. Tonks, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin arrive as a trio, their wands already raised for battle. Alastor joins them, along with Kingsley and William Weasley; Alastor barely waits for his Apparition to complete before he's hexing a Death Eater.

The Death Eater that Nizar warned earlier takes advantage of his distraction to attack. Nizar shakes his head and swings the seax. The idiot goes down screaming, dying of the basilisk venom eating its way through his veins.

Minerva hexes a Death Eater in a way that sends him tumbling to the floor with a pained screech. "Are you all right, Nizar?"

Nizar considers it for a moment before he leans against the closest wall, vomiting up spit and not much else. "I'll be fine. Have fun."

"Oh, absolutely," Minerva says with a grim smile. She wades into the battle like a proper, fearless lioness. Godric would definitely approve.

Someone grasps Nizar's arm when his knees buckle. "Easy," she says. "I think you've played bait for the Order long enough this morning."

"But who am I going to stab if you lot have all the fun?" Nizar glances at her and smiles. "Andromeda."

Andromeda gives him a gracious nod. "We should get you away from these idiots."

"I can get myself away from these idiots, but thank you." Nizar shakes his head to throw off the sense of dizziness plaguing him. All right; *maybe* he can get himself away from these idiots. "Where the hell did Voldemort go?"

Andromeda lets out a disdainful sigh. "He left the moment we arrived. All of the intelligent ones have gone."

The unfamiliar ginger jogs up to Nizar as the others begin to pursue Death Eaters down varying black corridors. "I'm Charlie Weasley," he introduces himself. "Dad wanted me to give this back to you," he says, holding out Nizar's wand. "He also says you should go home and let the rest of us clean house."

Nizar takes back his wand, tucking it into his right sleeve. Then, holding his hand steady, he sheathes the seax so that it rests in its silk-wrapped hiding place again. "What, three dead Death Eaters, a Petrified gigantic fucking snake, and slicing a hole in Voldemort's face is supposed to be enough?"

"It's bloody impressive, is what," Charlie replies, grinning.

Nizar decides that yes, that is probably enough vengeance for one day. He is fucking done. "You two go ahead and hex the remaining idiots, then. I'm leaving."

“Are you certain?” Andromeda asks, hesitating.

Nizar nods. “I am. And...your sister is here. You might want to keep her alive.”

Andromeda frowns. “Understood, Professor,” she murmurs, and follows Charlie.

Nizar turns around and walks back the way he came. He thinks so, anyway. He’s walking forward, but everything looks the same. The corridor is also starting to tilt on its axis, but since Nizar isn’t falling over, he ignores it.

Fuck, but he feels awful.

“Nizar!”

Nizar wakes up, confused to find himself slumped against a wall. He must have passed out while standing upright. Warm hands on his shoulders turn him around so that the wall is at his back. “Nizar?”

“Sal.” Nizar opens his eyes to look at Salazar, who is still dressed in denims, lace-up boots, a different t-shirt, and that same beaten jacket. “You felt it, too?”

“The fucking Blood Summons? As if I could ignore it. It was lessened when you decided to play bait, *idiota*.” Salazar gives Nizar a concerned look. “What did that bastard do?”

Nizar swallows and tries to put words together, a process that should not be this difficult. “He tried to take my magical core...so I took it back, and then stole part of his, because fuck him, anyway.”

“That was *stupid*.”

“I know it was stupid, but he fucking started it,” Nizar retorts, tilting sideways until Salazar hauls him upright again.

Salazar growls under his breath and then taps the right side of Nizar’s forehead. “You remember that we discussed this, even if you do not remember the soul jar itself, yes?”

Nizar frowns at him. “Sal, that was just a few days ago. My memory isn’t that bad.”

“It’s bad enough that the failure of the fucking Preservation Charm means you’ve forgotten exactly *why* you cannot take any part of Voldemort’s magic into yourself!” Salazar shouts back. “Like seeks like, you stupid little shit!”

“Oh.” Nizar blinks a few times as he considers it. Right. That is...bad. “That will be fun to burn through.” Perhaps literally. “I need to—I need to go home.”

Salazar takes both of his hands. “You’ll have to perform the Desplazarse, little brother. It’s been too long—I don’t know if I remember your home the way I should.”

Nizar nods and pulls himself together. He Apparated into this stupid Ministry, and he can damned well get back out again. “Hang on,” he whispers, and then Side-Along Apparates

them back to his quarters.

He stands in place, waiting for lingering vertigo from the Ministry to fade, only to realize it isn't. This isn't from the Ministry, but from his core as it tries to rid itself of sickened magic. "Sal?" he asks, and then stares in surprise.

Salazar's head is back, eyes closed, with sparks of green appearing at his fingertips. "Oh, I should have—that's Hogewáp's magic, the castle—it's been fucking *centuries*—!"

Nizar puts his hand on Salazar's shoulder and then he can feel it, too. That's the true depth of Hogwarts' magic, singing through his brother's veins, a strength that hasn't been accessed to its fullest in a long, long time. "Oh," he breathes, smiling. "Welcome home, Salazar."

Salazar turns around and wraps him in a bone-crushing embrace. "It's been nine hundred fifty-six years, fifty-two days since I've last felt that. I didn't know if she'd remember me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Sal. She's never going to forget those who loved her best," Nizar says.

Salazar swallows and steps back, nodding. Then he places his hand against Nizar's face and jerks it back, hissing. "And now you're off and trying to impersonate a furnace. Bath, little brother."

Nizar is already fumbling with robe buttons. "I'm aware, dammit. Worse than usual, right?"

Salazar tilts his head. "We could toss you at a glacier and melt half of it."

"That sounds like a great idea. Let's do that, instead."

Salazar makes an amused sound and starts helping him with the buttons when Nizar can't get his fingers to cooperate. "No, let's not, little brother. They don't need the help. Let me introduce you to modern science and a terrible thing known as global warming..."

* * * *

Severus watches, his expression impassive, as Voldemort tortures those foolish enough to be in close range when his temper erupted. The gaping, black-edged wound in the side of Voldemort's face has finally stopped growing, revealing the whole of his inner jaw and the sharpened edges of his teeth.

When long minutes pass and nothing changes, Severus, Narcissa, and those of wiser intellect choose to depart the Riddle Manor. "Did you see Lucius?" Narcissa asks before he can Apparate from the field beyond the house.

"All I know is that he was not one of those Petrified when Nizar Slytherin revealed he carries an actual basilisk on his person," Severus answers her. Narcissa nods and Apparates; Severus waits a moment and then does the same.

He arrives on the eastern border of the Forbidden Forest and yanks off the cloak of a Death Eater. He shrinks it down to something tiny and unidentifiable before pocketing it.

Then he leans against a tree and laughs until he feels like he might start dry heaving.

Severus isn't even sure why he's laughing, unless it's hysterical relief. He's exhausted, and the Mark is starting to burn, but this morning gifted him sights he never once believed he would see. Voldemort in fear. Voldemort literally being dragged around by a magical leash before gaining a permanent, disfiguring wound to the face. Voldemort in terror and disguising it with rage, defeated in a way that cannot be denied or twisted into a stalemate.

For the first time, Severus truly believes Voldemort is not going to win this war. Voldemort is going to *lose*.

The moment he Apparates directly back to his quarters, Severus hits his knees as the pain from the Dark Mark ramps up from minor irritant to crippling agony. He digs the painkilling potion and the restorative out of his robe pocket before drinking them both. Then he leans against his sofa, breathing in harsh gasps, until the burn of the Mark is less. "Filky."

The house-elf appears and gives him a worried look. "It being time for the Professor Snape to be returning!" she exclaims. "The Professor Slytherin was back a half-hour ago, though he is not being well."

Not well? Severus frowns, but he's not yet sure what to make of that. "I need you to ask Professor Dumbledore to come here, at his earliest convenience. By Floo."

Filky gives his left shoulder a pat that makes his arm throb less when house-elf magic interferes with Voldemort's link. "Filky be telling him at once," she says, and Disapparates.

Severus yanks open the drawer to his writing desk and uses his wand to retrieve a second pain-killing potion. The restorative will get him through the rest of his morning, but if he doesn't dull this pain, he won't be able to get off this damned floor.

The flames in the fireplace turn brilliant green before Albus strolls out, dusting off his robes. His eyes widen at the sight of Severus on the floor before he kneels down next to him. "Are you all right?"

"No, I always lie about on the floor of a morning," Severus drawls in return, and then clamps his hand back down over the Mark. "Dammit!"

"I take it Lord Voldemort is angry," Albus says in a mild voice.

"That...is an understatement." Severus clenches his jaw, relaxing only when the second painkilling potion joins the first. "I don't think I've ever felt this much rage through the Mark."

"Arthur informed me that Nizar Slytherin was Voldemort's target this morning, but I do not know as much of this morning's events as I would prefer." Albus sits back on his heels, frowning. "I'm sorry to ask, but—"

“If I couldn’t speak of it, I wouldn’t have sent for you.” Severus lets his head thump back against the seat cushion. “The Dark Lord used a familial Blood Summons to attract his family member, a Summons that literally could not be ignored unless it was answered.” Severus explains what he could see and hear while standing cloaked and hooded within the Department of Mysteries, filling in blanks from what Dumbledore might already have discerned just from seeing the situation unravel as the Order arrived.

“Then Nizar is well?” Albus asks, a sharp look in his eyes that Severus isn’t certain he likes.

“I’m assuming so. I haven’t seen him yet, but the house-elves say he returned.” Severus decides upon a half-truth to placate Albus. “Given the magic I believe he performed this morning, Nizar is most likely asleep. I doubt we’ll see him at all today.”

“Very well. This giant serpent—its death pained Voldemort?” Albus is frowning. “Did he say anything of why—Nizar or Voldemort?”

“If so, I couldn’t hear it over the Dark Lord’s shrieking,” Severus lies. Six months ago, he would have mentioned the word *Horcrux* and pushed for further understanding of the situation. Now he knows what the situation was, and is, and decides he’d rather keep his thoughts on the matter to himself.

“Voldemort was not expecting to face an enemy with greater knowledge of certain magics than himself. His arrogance has often been that of true skill, and Voldemort is unaccustomed to those times when it fails him.” Albus offers his arm and helps Severus up from the floor so that Severus can rest on his sofa. “This is the second time Tom Riddle has underestimated his ancestor. He may not do so a third time.”

“The Dark Lord will put much more care and planning into his third attempt, especially as Nizar left Voldemort with a permanent hole in the side of his face. The blade Nizar carried today—its edge is coated in basilisk venom.”

Albus lifts an eyebrow before smiling. “A lovely trick. I shall have to keep it in mind.”

Trick. Severus doesn’t think it an accurate term. “What were the results of the morning, Albus?”

“Bear in mind that the only reason we are able to send any of them to Azkaban to await trial is due to the fact that they were all most certainly *not* where they belonged. The Department of Mysteries guards its secrets; the only members of the Order to be present this morning are all those whom the guardians of the Department have declared in writing to be allowed to wander those particular halls. Of course, we all had to vow to behave ourselves and take nothing, but that is a vow easily given,” Albus adds. “The benefit of the trial this time, however...”

Severus bites back a vicious smile. “None of them will be able to hide the Dark Mark.”

Albus nods. “And claims of acting under the Imperius Curse will not be taken lightly. Cornelius is against the entire proceedings, of course, but right now in criminal matters, his word is not law—Madam Bones holds sway. She is authorizing the use of Veritaserum

against all those bearing the Mark. I do not know how long it will take for things to proceed to a trial with Cornelius doing his best to impede the process, but all those arrested should have the dubious pleasure of remaining in Azkaban until such time as they occur.”

“Very well. Who? There are no doubt students in my House who will need to be informed.”

“Lucius Malfoy, to Draco Malfoy’s impending regret.” Albus sighs. “I fear the boy may lose both of his parents, but if Narcissa has taken a more active involvement, she was not seen at the Ministry, and is not among those captured. Also: Antonin Dolohov, John Avery Junior, Victor Crabbe, Richard Jugson, Theodore Nott Senior, Walden Macnair, and the Lestrangle brothers, the latter whom will be returned to Azkaban without delay.”

The first and the last are the most surprising. “More than I’d have thought. Most of them are idiots, but Lucius is usually not so foolish.”

“I do believe Auror Tonks and Remus Lupin were quite insistent upon Lucius’s capture.”

“I see.” Severus suspects ill feelings on Lupin’s part. Lupin was technically a godparent to Potter, and Lucius had already been known to have ill dealings with the child.

“Sirius Black focused on the Lestranges, wishing for them to rejoin Bellatrix Lestrangle in Azkaban. *Keeping the family together*, he said.”

“Any casualties?” Severus asks.

“Corban Yaxley, Justin Travers, and Florence Parkinson,” Albus replies. “The first and last were Petrified by looking at a basilisk at an inopportune moment. Mister Travers, I believe, had an encounter with that basilisk venom-imbued blade you mentioned.”

Severus nods, grateful that none of them have family in Hogwarts he need concern himself with at the moment. Florence was a very distant cousin to Pansy Parkinson’s branch of the family, but was estranged for reasons that had nothing to do with Voldemort.

Albus rests his arm against Severus’s fireplace mantelpiece, gazing at the clock before glancing at the small portrait of the patchwork-robed wizard next to it. “Sirius is doing better now that he is safely ensconced in Twelve Grimmauld Place, but I should never have allowed him to be sent to Azkaban without trial. I can never take that mistake back, Severus, much as I cannot take back the mistake I made with you. I don’t yet know what to do about either.”

“I’m rather fond of still being alive, myself,” Severus informs him.

“Indeed,” Albus murmurs. “Do you think Voldemort will attempt to capture his ancestor by means of magical Summoning again?”

“I imagine Nizar is going to make certain this morning’s Summons can’t be repeated,” Severus replies. If Nizar can remove the Mark when Albus claims it impossible without Voldemort’s death, then Severus thinks it beyond likely.

“That’s good to know.” Albus turns around and regards Severus. “Have you eaten breakfast, my boy?”

“Albus, I haven’t even been to bed yet.”

“That would explain the scent of a good Restorative Potion in the air.” Albus gives him a stern look. “It’s quarter past eight o’clock, Severus. Break your fast before seeing to matters of schooling and of Slytherin House. Consider it one of the very rare orders I give you.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “You’re my employer. They’re *all* orders.”

“Not at all. Merely polite requests,” Albus responds with infernal twinkling, and then uses Floo Powder from his own robe pocket to exit Severus’s quarters.

Filky brings Severus a tea tray with flaking scones on it, the only thing Severus thinks he might be able to get his stomach to accept. Not well, she’d said of Nizar, but the elf doesn’t know how to elaborate beyond “bad magic.”

Severus scowls at his tea. Bad magic. Voldemort had planned to take the whole of Nizar’s magic for himself with that ancient spell he’d dug up from God knew where.

You have the strength of my family, Nizar Slytherin. It is strength that I will claim for myself.

I thought you were the strongest magician in Britain. Nizar’s defiance of Voldemort had been vaguely familiar. It was like seeing the ghost of an ancient childhood, but Nizar’s smile had a ferocious edge that Potter’s lacked.

I am the most powerful wizard alive.

Then you wouldn’t need to steal magic from someone else, would you?

STOP! Voldemort, finally realizing his best-laid plans were not going to succeed.

I won’t stop! In fact, the Christians have this thing about judgement. An eye for an eye, Tom.

“Fuck,” Severus whispers in realization. Nizar turned the tables, stole part of Voldemort’s magic, and poisoned his own core doing it. “Filky!” When the house-elf appears, Severus holds out his hand. “Take me upstairs, directly to Nizar’s quarters. I know what magic you’re speaking of now.”

Filky bobs her head and takes him right to Nizar’s sitting room. When she leaves again, Severus hears more than one voice, both male, coming from the bathroom.

“Seriously, shut up.” That is Nizar, his voice slurring.

“You’ve not a leg to stand on right now, especially as you’re in a bathtub trying to boil the water while sitting in it.” The second voice is unfamiliar, slightly deeper than Nizar’s, with a high-unfathomable accent. If Severus had to guess, he’d say that someone took a Scottish man and dragged him across the entirety of Europe to see which vocal patterns would stick.

“*You’re* not standing right now, either!”

“Yes, but it isn’t because I went and did something foolish this morning, now is it?”

“Excuse me? Who had the gall to make a deal with an Aspect of the universe to not fucking die?” Nizar asks in a scathing voice. “Come on: tell me who did such, Sal.”

“That’s not fair. You’re referring to stupidity committed seven hundred fifty years ago!”

Severus feels his eye twitch as he realizes exactly who Nizar’s houseguest is. Perhaps his presence isn’t needed, after all.

“STOP STANDING IN MY SITTING ROOM AND COME IN HERE!” Nizar yells in what sounds like a full temper.

“Especially as a sitting room is usually for sitting!” Severus hears a splash, followed by water striking stone. “Dammit, stop bloody splashing me!”

Severus glances down to find that the seax from that morning is sheathed on the floor next to a wad of silk. Next is Nizar’s robe, his boots, a pair of socks—it’s like following one man’s post-battle debris trail. Even Kanza is part of it, though she’s dozing in front of the fireplace instead of lying in his path.

Severus rounds the corner through the open bathroom doorway to discover that Nizar is sprawled out in his own full bathtub, still wearing his trousers and shirt, though his bare feet and arms are hanging out. Sitting on the floor, legs stretched out in front of him and wearing completely Muggle clothing...is Salazar Slytherin.

Severus decides it’s wiser to focus on the more immediate problem. “Nizar. What are you doing?”

“Trying to keep my blood from frying my brain,” Nizar replies. “I just keep overheating the water, so this is...”

“Cold tap fill number three.” Salazar does not look impressed. “Stop eating the magic of corrupt idiots.”

“Yes. That.” Nizar scowls. “I really hope I wiped the smile off that fucker’s face.”

It takes a hell of a lot of willpower not to smile. “You *literally* wiped off part of his face.”

Salazar chuckles. “Nizar and I both have a temper. Voldemort must have stepped on Nizar’s last thread of patience.”

“He did that by existing,” Nizar mutters. “By the way, I hope no one is looking for me to do anything useful today. I’m half-delusional, and *he* is magically fucking stoned.”

Severus resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “The former, I understand, but dare I ask about the latter?”

“I’m tied to the western corner of this castle’s magic, and I’ve not been here in nine-and-a-half centuries,” Salazar answers him. “It’s a bit intense.”

“He’s supposed to be keeping me awake, but I’ve been doing that more for him.” Nizar splashes water at Salazar again.

Salazar glowers at Nizar. “One more time when it’s not necessary, and I’ll wait until the coldest day of the year to drop you into the Black Lake. You need to drain that water and refill it again, by the way. That was almost the temperature of bath water.”

“There is another option.” Severus waits until he has some rather bleary-eyed Slytherin attention. “Magical blood poisoning. That is what Nizar suffers from, yes?”

“It is.” Salazar’s expression shifts to distress before he buries the emotion. “Made worse by the source of the poison.”

“Well, then. You can drain and refill the tub and spend your day impersonating a sponge, or…” Severus draws out the last phial he’d gathered early that morning. It’s a rare potion that resembles Felix Felicis but is entirely unrelated. Felix Felicis looks like molten gold; this is gold that appears as solid metal until one tilts the glass to watch it move.

“Potissima Sanguine Purificationis.” Nizar gives the phial a bewildered look. “You were just carrying about one of the rarest potions in existence?”

“I normally do not,” Severus says while Salazar uses the bathroom wall as a brace to climb to his feet. “Besides, are you surprised?”

“*I’m* not.” Salazar shakes his head to clear it, blinking what appears to be actual silver and green sparks from his eyes as he does so.

Salazar Slytherin is the same height as Nizar, though his hair is much darker, his eyes greener—if not for an obvious difference in age, he and Nizar could pass for bloody fraternal twins. It’s Salazar’s Muggle dress that is pushing this unexpected meeting into absolutely surreal territory. “Potissima Sanguine Purificationis is just the sort of paranoia I’d expect from you.”

“Expect?” Severus repeats, lifting an eyebrow.

Salazar grins at him. “Oh, we’ve met before. Just not with me wearing this face. Polyjuice is such a useful tool for spying.”

Severus stares back. “The Underground.”

“I did say he was safer than both of us, didn’t I?”

“Are you sure about that?” Severus glances at Nizar, who is watching them like they’ve started speaking a foreign language.

“Well, relative terms.” Salazar holds out his hand. “May I?”

Severus hands it over, thinking that at the moment, Salazar probably has a better chance of getting a potion down Nizar’s throat than Severus does. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you both know of Potissima Sanguine Purificationis.”

“It was one of Merlin’s inventions.” Salazar sits down next to the tub. “Gods help you if he visited the castle and you didn’t know that potion yet.”

Severus feels his eyebrows rise. “Bloody *Merlin*?” He’d no idea that Merlin was the originator of the most potent magical blood purifiers ever created.

“Or Myrddin, if you like.” Nizar is giving the phial of golden liquid a level of suspicion usually reserved for poison.

Salazar removes the stopper from the phial. “Cranky bastard of a magician. Truly a loss for magic when he died, but also a bit of a relief that he wasn’t making eight-year-olds cry any longer for not knowing a potion the fourteen-year-olds were just learning.”

“I can’t decide if I’m insulted or delighted that my teaching style is comparable to a historically brilliant wizard.” Severus is also trying to figure out how this entire situation came about, let alone this bloody conversation.

“Well, I haven’t punched *you* yet, so you can’t be that bad at it,” Nizar says. “Fucker made my daughter cry. I knocked out two of his teeth for that.”

“You. Hit. Merlin.”

“He deserved it!” Nizar protests while Salazar laughs.

“You hit *Merlin*.” Severus can’t decide if he’s proud, or skirting the edge of being historically appalled.

“I didn’t know who he was at the time and I do not want to drink that shit, Sal,” Nizar says, glaring at the phial. “I hadn’t met him yet. Then I find that fucker making my eight-year-old daughter cry because she can’t make Potissima Sanguine Purificationis, and I didn’t take it well. I have a temper. It’s why I was stupid enough to take an idiot’s magic when he tried to steal mine.”

“Nizar. Drink the stupid potion,” Salazar orders softly. Nizar’s eyes are beginning to shift colors from Salazar’s darker green to hazel to multi-hued gold, then to the pale grey tinged-green that Severus is most familiar with. “Cold water isn’t working quickly enough. If you don’t, the fever will fry your brain.” Salazar shoves the flask into Nizar’s hand. “Drink it now, or I will *make* you.”

“Fine,” Nizar mutters resentfully, and drinks the potion. “Happy now?”

“I’m fucking relieved, is what,” Salazar whispers. Then he catches Nizar by his wet shirt when Nizar abruptly slumps in a dead faint, nearly slipping beneath the water. “And that was why he was fighting it.”

“I’ve used that potion twice in my life, and that’s the first time I’ve seen that response,” Severus says in alarm.

“He’s fine.” Salazar looks around and then uses his chin to gesture at a clean towel.

“Potissima Sanguine Purificationis always knocks him on his arse. He’ll be out for the rest of

the day, if not the rest of the night.”

“But that doesn’t solve the whole of the problem, does it?” Severus asks, getting the towel before helping Salazar to haul Nizar out of the bathtub. Nizar’s skin is so hot to the touch it’s amazing that steam isn’t rising from his clothes.

Salazar glances up at Severus. “No, but he should be recovered from today’s stupidity before repairing the rest.”

Severus uses his wand to cast a drying charm before Nizar’s sodden clothes can soak the floor. “Because it was Voldemort’s magic. Because of that damned Horcrux.”

Salazar gives him a sharp look. “Nizar told you?”

“Yes. The same day he went to find you.”

Salazar lifts both eyebrows. “Then he must care for you quite a bit. Nizar can literally speak for days and never say a word about himself, but he gave you a truth even he wasn’t prepared for.”

Severus inclines his head. “He has...said as much.”

“And you? Have you done the same?” Salazar asks, tossing the wet towel into the hamper before lifting his brother into his arms.

“Not as I should have,” Severus admits, unwilling to lie to the Founder of his House. He suspects the man would know at once. “But I was going to do so today. On the Solstice. Then we had the events of the morning which led us to this.”

“And what a cock-up of a day this has been.” Salazar carries Nizar straight back to his bedroom with the familiarity of one who has been in these rooms often, though he seems puzzled by the standing wardrobe and chest of drawers. He places Nizar on the bed and then rests his hand on Nizar’s forehead. “Oh, gods, thank you for being a paranoid bastard,” he says to Severus. “That is already a hell of a lot better. I think all we were achieving with cold baths was a delay.”

“Then I’m glad I was paranoid enough to both brew it and carry it with me today,” Severus replies.

Salazar gives him a searching look that is just as piercing as one from Rowena’s portrait, something that the passing centuries has refined to a razor’s edge. “Severus Snape, Head of my House: how much do you value my brother?”

For all the time that Severus has spent walking the jagged edge between Death Eater and defender within Dumbledore’s Order, he always thought the choice to finally choose one, the other, or something else entirely would be pain. Instead, it’s easy.

“If it meant helping Nizar, I would literally allow you to cut out my heart.”

Salazar glances down at Nizar. “I don’t think he’d be pleased if I did so.” Salazar reaches out; Severus hesitates a moment before clasping his arm. “My brother chose well, Severus.”

Severus tries not to grimace. “He chose an idiot.”

“Yes, well, we all have our moments at that,” Salazar says. “I know your schedule for the day, Severus—yes, I make it my business to know such things. I know you’ve other duties. Will you trust me to look after him until those duties are done?”

Severus nods. “If you are even half the man Nizar has spoken of, you may be one of the very few beings on this earth that I trust. Nizar dubbed you and the other Founders as ‘kind, vicious lunatics.’”

Salazar smiles, a fond and weary expression. “That we were.”

Ghosts

Chapter Summary

The consequences of a battle reach further than the field upon which it is fought.

Severus goes back to his quarters long enough to take a bath. He removes Riddle Manor remnants and God knows what else from his hair and skin before dressing in clean clothing, ready to begin his day at Hogwarts in his much more official, hated capacity. He'd rather be doing nothing of the sort, but aside from what certain imbeciles among the staff like to imply, Severus understands the responsibilities tied to being Slytherin's Head of House—all too well.

In his office, he writes four different messages to Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott Junior, Vincent Crabbe, and Seraphina Dolohov, telling them each to see him in his office at spaced out intervals of a half-hour. That should give him enough time to inform them of that morning's arrests, and to deal with any potential fallout. He expects very little; they're Slytherins. They grieve in private.

Once those letters have been magically delivered to their recipients, Severus rests his head in his hands before penning two more messages to Minerva and Pomona. Vanity Jugson is a first-year Gryffindor and Richard Jugson's youngest child; Xavier Macnair is a fourth-year Hufflepuff and Walden Macnair's eldest.

Avery Junior has no children, thank the fucking stars, and no school-age relatives. There are no Lestranges in Britain aside from Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and Rabastan. Bellatrix's crimes alone were so heinous that the remaining Lestranges fled Britain when the war's end, and Bellatrix Lestrangle's incarceration, brought them no peace.

Crabbe arrives first, as Severus thinks him to be the most likely to drive him to Firewhiskey before noon. "Arrested for being a Death Eater?" Crabbe asks in his slow, careful way. The boy isn't stupid, but he struggles to pick up on nuances that others find obvious. "With proof?"

"I expect they'll find something incriminating, yes," Severus says in a neutral tone. He didn't say a damned thing about the reason for his father's arrest. "He was trespassing in the Ministry, supposedly on someone else's orders."

Crabbe's expression clears. "Imperius Curse, I expect. It'll blow over, just like the last time. Thank you for letting me know, Professor."

"You're welcome, Mister Crabbe." Severus waits until the door shuts and considers the benefits in banging his head against his own desk. Vincent Crabbe is both overly optimistic

and utterly certain his father is allied to the correct side in this war. It won't be long before the young idiot will be old enough to bear the Dark Mark.

Theodore Nott, Severus is less certain of. He watches closely as he informs Nott that his father is in Azkaban, awaiting trial for trespass within the Ministry.

Nott frowns. "Was it *him*, sir? Him what Professor Slytherin refers to as a noseless walking corpse?"

Severus raises an eyebrow. "According to the information granted to me—information that can go no further than this room—he was indeed seen in the Dark Lord's company."

"That fucking idiot," Nott says in disgust. "Sorry, sir."

"I heard nothing but the honest emotional response of a young man who has been informed of ill news."

"You've always been kind about that, sir." Nott resettles his bookbag over his shoulder. "My father has that stupid Dark Mark. He doesn't know that I saw it, and I wasn't about to tell him. I don't know if he had it during the last war, but he sure has the Mark now."

"Mister Nott, that is, perhaps, not something you should be telling me," Severus warns him.

Nott shrugs. "I know you won't say anything unless you've got no choice. I might be late getting back from winter break, sir. Mum's been suspicious for a while, but once it comes out in the *Prophet* that he's got that thing on his arm, she'll be filing for divorce."

Severus nods. "You have my sympathies for the situation. Please give my kindest regards to your mother once the matter has become clear."

"Thank you, sir. I will."

Informing Seraphina Dolohov involves watching an eleven-year-old girl's expression crumple as the perceived betrayal settles into her thoughts. It also involves holding her and letting her sob into his robes, hiccupping about not wanting to be a Death Eater like her uncle, never wanting to be a Death Eater, that being a Good Slytherin isn't supposed to mean anything like You-Know-Who.

Severus pats her shoulder and gives her a Calming Draught, excusing Miss Dolohov from classes for the rest of the day. Once her parents receive word of Antonin Dolohov's imprisonment, they might not wait for tomorrow morning's train and send for their daughter early.

He walks Miss Dolohov back to the Common Room and lets her in, seeing her down the flight of stairs to the dormitories. *If only all of us had been as wise as you are now*, he thinks with the same old ache of regret.

Before Draco arrives, Severus gets a response from Minerva: *I have a first-year distraught to the point of literal hysteria*, she writes. *I know your standards, Severus, but I think it would*

help calm the lass if she were to be granted a holiday extension on her last Potions assignment for this half of the term.

Severus sends back a one-word reply: *Granted*. She won't be fool enough to tell anyone of his supposed leniency.

Draco pushes open his office door a half-hour before lunch, just after Severus drains another restorative. He didn't sleep well Tuesday or Wednesday, and not at all on Thursday. Given the events of the morning, and far too many emotional upheavals, Severus is looking forward to lunch, where he'll only need to defend against bloody *gossip*.

"Bad news, sir?" Draco asks, not even bothering with a greeting.

"Mister Crabbe keeps secrets as well as ever, I see."

Draco grimaces. "Yes, sir. My parents?"

"Sit down, Mister Malfoy." Severus waits until Draco takes a nervous seat in one of the armchairs. Here is where he will have to tread most carefully. On the surface, Severus is meant to be allied to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, an affiliation that carried them through the war's intermission of Hallowe'en in 1981 to twenty-fourth June of this year.

"Your father was arrested for trespassing within the Department of Mysteries this morning."

Draco draws in a sharp breath, but keeps his composure. "Does my mother know?"

"I suspect she is aware, yes, if unofficially at this juncture." Severus sits down behind his desk. "Do you have questions?"

Draco bites his lip and laces his hands together in his lap. "Yes, sir, I do, but I suppose how many questions I have depends on the answer to my first question."

"Someone has been paying attention to Professor Slytherin's discussions of verbal defence," Severus notes, pleased. "Ask."

"Where do your loyalties lie, Professor?" Draco asks bluntly. "With Slytherin, or with... with... *him*."

"Do you mean our literal Slytherin, or our House?"

Draco's brow furrows. "I'm not sure a distinction exists between the two, sir, but for the fact that one is alive and one is a concept."

"Very well-spoken, Mister Malfoy," Severus grants him. "However, that is a question that I am not currently at liberty to answer."

Draco frowns. "I see. Then I'll pass along the message I received from Mother this morning, sir. She wishes to see you over the winter holiday, perhaps at Christmas. She wishes to meet Professor Slytherin."

“She could do so without my presence,” Severus says, even though part of him wants to leap at the opportunity to have a legitimate excuse *not* to attend Hogwarts’ Christmas Dinner.

“Yes, she could, but you’ve known him longer than most of us.” Draco shifts his eyes to one side. “You also tolerate his presence when you spend most of your time appearing as if you’d happily slaughter the rest of the school staff, sir.”

“That was a completely subpar attempt at fishing for gossip, Mister Malfoy. Do keep listening to Professor Slytherin’s lectures, and look to your own mother’s good example.” Severus stands up; Draco scrambles to copy him. “One more thing.”

“Sir?”

“Remember that you are a Slytherin,” Severus says. “If news breaks of those early morning arrests during the day, ignore the rumor and whisper that will dog your steps. Your father’s actions are not your own.”

“Yes, sir,” Draco replies, hesitating. “It’s...it’s a shame no one ever told Potter that.”

Severus keeps his expression neutral, despite his surprise that Malfoy would have any concern for Harry Potter at all. “I imagine he was told, but not in a way that he would have understood—and I am not implying a lack of intelligence.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I was granted the knowledge two years ago that Mister Potter argued with the Sorting Hat, Mister Malfoy, and he argued with it for one reason alone,” Severus says.

“You can argue with the Hat?” Draco asks in disbelief. “I mean—what was the reason, sir?”

“The Hat wanted to place Mister Potter in Slytherin, but the first example of a Slytherin Potter met...was you, Mister Malfoy.”

Severus gives Draco an unimpressed look as Draco’s mouth falls open. “All eleven-year-olds make mistakes by acting as the children they are, and perform truly magnificent blunders regarding their own behavior. For that reason, you’ve long been forgiven for being the reason our House was not graced by a presence that would have restored Slytherin’s prestige in Wizarding Britain’s eyes without a breath of effort needed. However, you are now in your fifth-year of schooling, Mister Malfoy. You dare not ever make that sort of social gaffe again.”

Draco shakes his head, baffled. “No, sir, I won’t, sir—but Potter? A *Slytherin*?”

“You should ask yourself what you know of Mister Potter that did not come from rumor, a badly-written history, or a Rita Skeeter article. You might find the answer enlightening. I will see you in the classroom at one o’clock, Mister Malfoy,” he says in dismissal.

Severus resumes his seat, tries to grade at least one essay before lunch, and fails utterly.

“It’s no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then,” he quotes, and then contemplates setting that same essay on fire. If he’d known how much Lewis Carroll was going to apply to his adult life, he wouldn’t have touched the stupid book in 1971.

I can’t remember things before they happen. For once, Severus thinks that quote makes perfect sense. “Lily, I looked after your son at the same time as he was doing similar for me,” he whispers, and then suffers from a sense of unbalanced disconnect from reality.

* * * *

Severus realizes he hasn’t quite paid attention to the soft spot Minerva is developing for yet another Slytherin when she—quietly—asks after Nizar’s health. Severus gives her the same answer he gave Albus, which is now most certainly true. Other than that, he has no idea how he gets through the midday meal. He has to have eaten something, else the third painkilling potion would have seen him lightheaded in the middle of a volatile Potions classroom. Voldemort’s rage has not abated; if anything, it might be worse.

All he is certain of is that he survives Double Potions with the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Maybe he was fortunate in that there were no incidents that day, or that the incidents in question were minor, inconsequential things. Nothing explodes, Longbottom melts nothing, and no one ends up with a cauldron upon their head. Severus is grateful, as his thoughts have been a churning mess all week.

At least his seventh-year N.E.W.T. Potions students can be trusted to rely on themselves, and to get his attention if they stumble in a way that requires intervention. Today they’re working on finalizing their attempts at creating antidotes for Veritaserum, as the old, original formula doesn’t bloody work.

Severus pulls himself together to check each cauldron before the end of class. The last day before the holiday is about finalizing the potion, not in testing it. This class is his only legal opportunity per year to use Veritaserum without breaking the law—as long as one ignores Albus’s blatant disregard of the regulation.

It isn’t a surprise that the Weasley twins have a non-lethal potion. It’s merely shocking that they bothered to concentrate on the given lesson at all. Parangyo and Shah also have a potential success, as does Greenwood and Applebee, Eastchurch and Ichijoh, Fawcett and Fairbourne. Those students get to bottle their creations, label them, and set them under Preserving Spells to review after the holiday. The remaining students are told to Vanish the contents of their cauldrons, as everything they created was either poisonous or completely inert.

The Weasley twins linger over cauldron cleanup until everyone else is gone. “Our Fearless Leader seems to be unavailable,” George says.

Fred nods. “We’re done for the day, and given maybe a few rumors we’ve gotten from other gingery sources, wonder if there’s anything we can do to assist-like.”

Severus thinks on it and realizes that yes, there is. “I have no idea if Professor Slytherin will be available tomorrow, but he’d be disappointed not to receive those essays still waiting to be turned in.”

“I don’t think disappointed is the right word for that,” George says. “Sixteen bloody feet from two hundred fourteen students, sir?”

“I said nothing of his sanity or lack thereof,” Severus replies dryly. “Since I doubt half the student body would trust that anything put into your hands would arrive at its final destination, go inform the other Heads of Houses that the slacking dunderheads amongst you can turn in those essays to them. I’ll collect the lot of them later and place them in his office.” Fred and George both leave the Potions classroom like young men on a quest.

By the dinner hour, the whole school is aware that Marked and supposedly former Death Eaters were captured while breaking into the Department of Mysteries, along with a list of those arrested. Severus reads the *Evening Prophet* in disgust. Once again, they refuse to mention the Dark Lord and imply that those arrested were breaking-and-entering of their own volition.

He frowns and reads the article through again. The *Prophet* doesn’t mention anyone from the Order. Only Fudge and Bones are quoted. The rest is presented as a narrative without a narrator. Idiots.

Severus glances up and checks on his Slytherins. Malfoy and Nott are ignoring any hint of a whisper, eating and engaging in conversation with everyone seated nearby. Crabbe is completely oblivious; Miss Dolohov went home via the Headmaster’s Floo that afternoon. He checks the other tables and doesn’t find Miss Jugson of Gryffindor or Macnair of Hufflepuff.

He turns back just in time to see the Gryffindors across from Nott and Malfoy literally close ranks against the other Houses’ staring, sitting shoulder to shoulder so that the Slytherins in that section aren’t visible.

Well, Severus thinks distantly, better they learn it too late than never at all.

* * * *

Severus collects the remaining forty-seven essays from the other Heads of Houses—none of *his* dared to wait this long—though in Pomona’s case it takes a bit of convincing. “Do you know where his office is?”

“I have a bit of an idea,” Pomona says defensively.

“Do you know how to get inside?” Severus asks.

“By opening the door.”

“No. Not unless you’ve been keyed to it, and you’ve never bothered to go upstairs and do so.” Severus gives her a thin smile when she grudgingly hands the remaining Hufflepuff essays over. “It’s like you expect him to deliberately fail your badgers, Pomona.”

Pomona frowns mightily. She expects it and she doesn’t, but is too polite to consider voicing the concern. Severus would ask outright rather than dance the thread of doubt, but some people’s approach to life is completely ridiculous.

Severus ducks into one of the empty rooms on the second floor to Apparate up to the empty seventh-floor Defence classroom, not in the mood to argue with a wall so that it will provide a door. When he goes into Nizar’s office, he halts in confusion at the sight of bookshelves that are half-empty. *What the hell?*

He finds a small stack of essays marked with grades and a larger stack that are not. He adds the late additions to the ungraded pile and takes a closer look at the bookshelves. The Cumbric, French, Pictish, or Gaelic copies of each text are missing; it seems as if only the Modern English versions remain. Severus is still amused that the language-updating duplication spell skipped Middle English. Perhaps it decided the French translations were good enough.

Clearing out the book clutter does give Nizar more space in the office, but it was originally well-organized clutter. Severus has a deep suspicion that it wasn’t a lack of space that promoted the change.

Severus turns back around, regarding the metal *S* on the door before he flips it and steps through into Nizar’s quarters.

Brice deSlizarse has nodded off in his portrait, snoring like someone intent on waking every canvas entity in the castle. Elfric scowls at his brother and prods him with a stick, to no avail. Galiena’s eyes widen when she turns away from the spectacle and sees him. “Severus! Is Father all right?”

“He’s fine.”

Galiena smiles. “I’m glad. I thought—I worried that if you’d come here, something might have gone wrong.”

“It could have, but your father is...” Severus decides he can admit it. “Your father was almost a match for Voldemort even when he had no training at all. Nizar is merely tired. He’s in his room, Galiena.” Nizar is also recovering from a magical form of blood poisoning, but Severus doesn’t want to panic a portrait, especially when there is no reason for it.

“Are things better than they were?” she asks, which isn’t quite what Severus expected. “Between you and Father. He seemed to be in a better mood last night.”

Severus feels his expression twist up in a grimace. “There is a reason why that office is spotless, isn’t there?”

Galiena smiles. “If you are upset, what do you do to occupy your time?”

“Read. Plot. Discard what isn’t necessary and retain what is.”

“You occupy yourself.” Galiena nods. “My father’s version of self-occupation has always veered towards planning for both short-term failure and the very long-term. Plotting for success comes afterwards.”

“That sounds familiar,” Severus mutters. They’re both pessimists, then, but he can tolerate such. He gets too much optimism in his life from Albus, Hagrid, Filius, Charity, and Bathsheda, anyway.

Severus turns around when he hears an owl’s gentle call. The snowy owl is in her portrait, resting on her branch and peering at Severus with her head turned almost entirely upside down. “Hello, Hedwig,” he murmurs. Hedwig fluffs herself, hoots, and looks entirely smug. “I do not exactly familiarize myself with the detailed appearance of every owl!”

“She likes you,” Galiena says.

“I’m not sure that can be said of any owl in existence.”

“It can be of her. She is very smart, for all that she, like us, is merely the painted magical essence and personality of the original. The owl in the castle that somehow learned Parseltongue—no, I’ve no idea how, don’t ask,” Galiena says in a wry voice, “comes to translate for her sometimes on Elfric’s invitation. Hedwig lived high in this castle, so she saw far. Always you looked after her Favorite, even if you did so in a manner uncharacteristic of humans.”

“Owls are too polite to say, ‘Like a complete bastard?’” Severus asks, bemused.

“Well, *I* wasn’t going to say it,” Galiena returns primly.

Severus watches as Hedwig slowly rightens her head. It’s always a fascinating visual to witness, even if Severus often thinks of owls as nothing more than molting providers of potions ingredients. “Are the Founders available? I’d like to speak with them.”

“I’ll let them know.” Galiena tugs on Elfric’s hand so he’ll come assist her.

It isn’t long before they return. “Most of them were already waiting for you. They’ve been watching you today,” Galiena says, and Elfric hisses. “Yes. Spying. Details, brother.”

Severus enters the hallway and hesitates at the storeroom, staring at the closed door to Nizar’s bedroom. He has no idea what to say to attempt to gain his House Founder’s attention. Title? Last name? First name? All of the options sound uncomfortably like he would be calling for a ghost.

Salazar saves him from needing to make a decision by opening the door. He stripped off the coat he was wearing earlier, revealing a black Pink Floyd t-shirt beneath. “Why are you merely standing there?”

Severus frowns. "I was trying to discern the politest way to gain your attention."

"My name works quite well," Salazar replies. "Has it gone that bloody late?"

"It has. Nizar?"

"Got up about an hour ago to sick up the remains of Potissima Sanguine Purificationis, tore me a new one in a language I don't remember how to speak any longer, and went back to bed." Salazar runs his hands through his short hair. "He'll be fine, but I would let him finish sleeping it off."

"As should you," Severus dares to suggest.

Salazar nods. "And you, I think. Neither of us look as if we've slept much. I'll show myself out."

"What should I tell Nizar about your departure?" Severus asks.

Salazar goes back into the bedroom long enough to retrieve his coat. "I'll send him a message in a day or two. I've people I need to check on. Good night, Severus."

"Good night," Severus starts to say, but Salazar has Disappeared before he's finished the first syllable.

In a hurry. Severus wonders if it's the Underground that prompted Salazar's swift departure.

He pushes open the bedroom door and approaches the bed long enough to confirm for himself that Nizar is no longer trying to impersonate a furnace. He's still dressed in his clothes from that morning, lying atop the bed's quilt. The pillow is thrown to one side, and Nizar's face is shoved firmly against the mattress. Severus finds him sleeping that way often and has wondered why, but never asked.

Severus goes into the storage room, where the versions of the Founders painted in 995 hang—portraits created exactly one thousand years ago. "Good evening," he greets them while thinking, *They were all so young.*

Salazar Slytherin is twenty-five and already has the beard that Severus encountered for the first time that morning in person, though his hair in the portrait hangs long and loose to fit the time period. Helga is twenty-seven, with golden hair and the sweetest features Severus thinks he's ever seen on a human being, but her eyes shine with hidden ferocity. Godric at age thirty-two looks like a rough-hewn Saxon warrior, but chose to go beardless at a time when it was a rarity. His flaming red hair is tied back; the only steel he holds is shining in his frost-blue eyes. Rowena at forty-one has solid raven's black hair; her deep blue eyes are as sharp and piercing as her quill. She bears an unearthly beauty that would one day be mirrored by Helena Ravenclaw, ghost of Ravenclaw Tower.

"Good evening, Severus," Rowena is the first to speak. "Have you need of something?"

"I'm not sure."

“Did something else happen today that hasn’t been gossiped about by the portraits in the castle?” Helga asks.

“Yes. I trust your portraits are guarded against coercion?”

“The one attempting the coercion must attempt to cast the magic against our original frames. No one can get to these frames but yourself and Nizar. Though perhaps I should also mention Salazar, now that he’s crawled out of the woodwork again.” Godric eyes Salazar with a wide grin.

Salazar rolls his eyes and ignores Godric. “No one can take the frames down from this wall except for Nizar. For a portrait, that is as much safety as we can count upon.”

He glances over to find that Rowena is studying him. “I think, perhaps, I understand part of what brings you here. May I speak?”

Severus inclines his head. “I’d be a fool to ask you not to.”

“The man you met in a portrait in 1971 truly remembers nothing of being Harry James Potter,” Rowena says in a gentle voice. “I believe you’ve discerned and come to believe as much for yourself, but independent verification is valuable.”

Severus releases a slow breath of restrained tension. “It is, though that hasn’t been my primary concern today.”

Rowena smiles. “But it was such after Tuesday afternoon.”

“Yes,” Severus admits.

“We think the Preservation Charm, when it realized it didn’t have the magical strength necessary to continue to preserve all aspects of Nizar, locked onto the magical adoption between himself and Salazar,” Helga explains. “It detected a great magical working and Preserved that, but not what came before.”

“He remembers nothing of it.” Godric has a disquieted expression on his face. “It distresses Nizar enough that he won’t speak of it.”

“And yes, he did recall it all before,” Salazar continues. “He was—he was relieved to no longer be in that terrible position. No entire populace should place their hopes for the future on the shoulders of a child, and then judge him and find him wanting when they won’t even ready him for the battle they wish him to fight.” Salazar swears under his breath. “The twentieth century has insane double-standards, Severus Snape.”

Severus thinks of his own childhood. “It does, yes. What happened to the Horcrux?”

“You could just ask myself that,” Salazar says.

“I could,” Severus allows, “But I’ve been in your real self’s company scarcely an hour. I don’t know if your memory of the past one thousand years is pristine, or if there are things you’ve forgotten.”

“He has a very good point, dearest,” Helga says to Salazar.

Salazar nods and then looks away from them all. “Tell them, Helga.”

Fierceness takes the gentleness from Helga’s features. “That particular soul shard was a nasty piece of work, a magic unique for its incredible foulness. We never fought its ilk, before or since that time. It took six months of mind magic training, and then another six months of solid effort to remove it. Nizar was in better spirits, better health, with it gone. It must have dragged on him so, but he would never admit to such.” She hesitates. “Nizar learned to trust us, Severus, but to admit weakness—that, he would never do. He always feared it would be used against him.”

“Severus Snape.” Rowena Ravenclaw is gazing at him, her blue eyes sad and serious. “In the spring of 990, we were delivered a fifteen-year-old boy who was not prepared for war, but victimized by it already. He was injured in spirit in so many ways, and tortured without any healing performed afterwards.”

“Cruciatu,” Helga says in a flat voice. “What is now called the Cruciatus Curse. Nizar said it had been a full month since the spells were cast, and still his bones bore thousands of tiny fractures from Cruciatu.”

Severus refuses to give in to a disturbed shudder. No child should be that intimately familiar with the Cruciatus Curse. “As far as I’m aware, he didn’t mention that it had occurred.”

Godric looks grieved. “An expression of weakness.”

“We hated what your world expected of him,” Rowena says. “Our fourteen-year-old magicians were far more advanced in learning compared to what he’d been taught. The idea of sending him back, no matter how necessary? Anathema,” she hisses.

Helga reaches from her frame to pat Rowena’s shoulder. “It’s all right, dear.”

“It isn’t. You were the one who wanted to kill the school’s current Headmaster with your bare hands,” Rowena replies.

Helga smiles, showing off far too many teeth. “Were?”

“When he arrived, we looked so close to siblings already, and spent so much time together as he tried to learn the languages of our time...” Salazar shrugs. “Well, we Deslizarses like to claim things, so I claimed him, and I never gave him up.”

Severus frowns. “Then why change his appearance?”

“Children do grow up, Severus,” Helga says, an uncomfortable mirroring of what Nizar once told Severus regarding Lily.

“Nizar learned the Metamorph magics and changed the color of his hair and eyes because he hated the reminder of all the times he’d been compared to others and found wanting—or compared to those others and then told nothing of them,” Godric explains. “My uncle was very cruel that way in regards to my own parents. He would tell me the ways in which they

were so much better than I, and nothing else. I left home as soon as I could find a magician who would take me on as an apprentice just to escape that nonsense.”

“Nizar changed nothing else about himself,” Salazar adds, giving Severus a searching look. “As I said—we looked so close to being siblings already. Is it such a terrible thing to be concerned with?”

“No. Curiosity drove the question, but I also asked for Nizar’s sake—he doesn’t recall anything different.” Severus regards the portraits, not sure he wants to ask the next question, but too many hints have been dropped in a very short time. “Is there something regarding Albus that I should know about?”

The Founders exchange considering looks. “You should know that Nizar does not trust him. He does not recall why this is so, but we do,” Rowena says.

“If we tell you, can you continue to act as you have?” Helga asks. “Albus Dumbledore intends well, though sometimes his methods...concern us.”

“You’re still putting too light a spin on it, dearest,” Rowena says to Helga, who is unrepentant.

“If I can look the Dark Lord in the eyes and lie to him without Voldemort ever knowing, I can pretend to like Albus Dumbledore,” Severus replies dryly.

“Nizar said that of all of his teachers, the one who was kindest was also the one who never taught him anything. Nothing at all,” Salazar says in a low voice. “One who speaks of reassurances that are devoid of substance, one who uses kindness to mask their purposes, no matter how well-intentioned—I do not trust them, Head of my House. If honesty is not enough to serve your great purpose, then perhaps it is not your great purpose that is flawed, but your means of accomplishing it.”

Rowena gives Salazar a concerned look, but does not disagree. “This does not mean that he is evil, but there is a flawed line of thought present in the Headmaster of our school. He could speak the truth and rally most of magical Britain to his banner, but he does not.”

“Do not forget those who bring you joy,” Severus murmurs, and feels a line of ice run down his spine.

Salazar nods. “I suspect something very much like that to be the root of this flaw, yes, but if he will not even confide the nature of it to Godric, Albus Dumbledore will tell no one at all.”

“How reassuring.” The portraits have successfully labeled a problem that Severus has been struggling with for several years—a problem that did not seem to exist prior to Harry Potter’s arrival in Hogwarts. It must have always been there, that flaw, but Potter’s presence revealed it.

Helga is examining him in a way that reveals the caring nature beneath the battle-bright ferocity. “What is your other concern, Severus Snape?”

“In 1981, I failed in my vows as a Slytherin and as a friend. My friend and her husband died; their child was orphaned and left in dubious care. I agreed to be Head of Slytherin House, a posting I was not prepared for—but do not regret,” Severus quickly adds. “I took on a vow to protect that orphaned child, and did so to the best of the ability left to me after being tied to a very short leash.

“On Tuesday I learned that the child is not only safe, but a child no longer. That particular vow is now fulfilled in a way I can tell *no one* about. I find my grief, and that sense of failure, to be...less.”

Severus’s voice quiets to a desperate-sounding rasp. “What kind of person am I when the bitterness of that loss, the strength of that vow, is simply gone?”

Deft Touch

Chapter Summary

"No matter our actions, the core of who we are doesn't change very much."

Nizar wakes up when dawn begins to brighten the light in his bedroom. He rolls over onto his side, blinking a few times to see if he's truly awake. He is, and he aches in a way that's reminiscent of the tail end of a bad night of wine—right. Potissima Sanguine Purificationis. He's bloody well hungover.

It takes a bit longer to put his head back together: today is most likely Saturday, yesterday was Friday, and that means yesterday was also a confrontation with a noseless fucking walking corpse. He compares the aftereffects of Potissima Sanguine Purificationis versus Voldemort with a hole in the side of his face, a destroyed Horcrux, and at least three dead Death Eaters, and decides it's beyond worth it.

Nizar sits bolt upright when he remembers. Salazar was here—it was Salazar who'd made certain he got out of the Ministry. Severus was, also, which is confusing. Nizar doesn't recall *why* Severus would have been present.

He gets clean clothing and goes straight to the bathroom without stopping, wanting the horrible taste out of his mouth and to have a bath not composed of icy water. By the time he's clean and dressed, the remaining ache is all but gone.

He goes out into the sitting room, thinking idly of asking an elf for tea, when he realizes there is a person lounging on his sofa, reading a scroll by the light of a single wall sconce. His first thought is Salazar, but Severus is both much taller and far paler than Nizar's brother. "Hello?"

"Good morning." Severus sits up easily, with no hint of stiffness or pain that would signify damage from Cruciatus torture. He's only wearing his shirt and trousers; his jacket is hanging over the back of one of the chairs, and his boots are by the door. "I do not have to ask if you slept well."

"That wasn't sleeping. That was a lack of consciousness," Nizar says. There is an extra blanket bunched up at the end of the sofa. "Did you sleep?" he asks, because it seems politer than asking, *Why are you here?*

"I have absolutely no idea."

Nizar nods. "Salazar?"

“He said he would send you a message...or simply appear. He wasn’t very specific about which he would choose.” Severus is gazing at the window with the same blank-eyed weariness Nizar feels like he’s been trapped in for days.

“I see I’m not the only one who is handling this with exceptional fortitude.”

Severus blinks twice and then glares at him. “None of this is what I expected of my life.”

Oh. “Are you...going?” Nizar is amazed when he doesn’t choke on the question.

“I don’t think I have much choice,” Severus mutters. “Why? Do you think I shouldn’t?”

Nizar opens his mouth and no words emerge. It should be an easy question to answer, and he can’t. He’s never been able to speak of such things so easily. It’s one thing to give another their freedom; it’s another to ask that they stay.

“Nizar! Nizar—breathe!”

There is such a tone of command in the word that Nizar draws in a whistling gasp without intending to. Then he chokes on it and leans forward, coughing through a moment of blank confusion when he realizes Severus is holding him. He feels like he’s gone far too long without drawing breath.

That hadn’t been Severus who spoke. That was Salazar. “Sal?”

“It’s all right,” Salazar’s portrait murmurs, a reassurance echoed by Galiena, Brice, Rowena, Helga and Elfric—in Parseltongue. They must have all crammed into those three portrait frames in the sitting room, but Nizar has no idea when that happened. He’s not even sure why he and Severus are both on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” Severus is saying. “I really—I was not lying when I said I am bad at this.”

“Bad at what?” Nizar feels utterly wretched; his voice is muffled from being pressed against Severus’s shoulder.

“The Founders said you disliked showing weakness. I think they would have been more accurate to say that you’d rather bury *it* until it buries *you*,” Severus says in a fond, wry voice. “You idiot.”

“You first,” Nizar retorts nonsensically. “What the fuck just happened?”

“What happened is that...” Severus runs his fingers through Nizar’s hair. “Nizar, enough has occurred in the last day that I’d forgotten exactly what the last week has been for us. I didn’t realize we were having two different conversations until you decided to have a bloody panic attack.”

“Oh.” Nizar frowns. He mentally resorts everything in his head and realizes that he’d stopped breathing when he’d tried to voice an answer he couldn’t give. “Oh! Fuck, you’re right. I’m sorry. You meant—no, we’re *both* really bad at this, Severus.”

“No,” Severus refutes. “This was not entirely your fault, especially as you’ve spent the last day and night unaware of what’s happened. I’m used to listening to the nuance in a conversation, Nizar. My life has often depended on it. I was pondering an invitation I received this morning, and I wasn’t paying the sort of attention that I should have been. In other circumstances, that is a mistake that could have gotten myself or another killed.”

“Thank you very much for that reminder,” Nizar mutters in frustration. He isn’t in the mood to contemplate other methods of death right now.

“Unlike you, I’ve had time to dwell on yesterday morning, and to…” Severus hesitates. “Panic is the wrong word. To attempt and fail to adjust, and to choose to simply keep going forward despite that failure. What concerns me at the moment is that you were so easily convinced that, one way or another, I’m departing. I know you well enough by now to understand that this isn’t a typical response. You hate unnecessary dramatics.”

Departure. Nizar thinks about it. “Everyone leaves, eventually.”

“Not everyone.” Severus sounds gentle, where in any other instance, Nizar would expect displeasure or irritation. “Unless you ask me to do so, I will not.”

Nizar tries to smile. “Have I not done a decent job of proving I don’t want that at all?”

“You’ve gone so far beyond that point, I can barely consider it without feeling like someone has ripped the air from my lungs,” Severus says in a tone of reverence that still holds a great deal of surprise. “Sit up, Nizar. Look at me?”

Nizar lifts his head, looking at familiar pale features, dark eyes, and black hair. “Beautiful,” he murmurs, watching the metallic aspects of other colors dance in Severus’s eyes and hair.

Severus snorts in amusement. “I’m nothing of the sort. Let me see, Nizar.”

If there is only one reason as to why Nizar will trust Severus over Albus Dumbledore, it is that Severus asks, whereas Dumbledore just tried to sneakily intrude. Nizar focuses long enough to set aside the defensive layers in his mind, not ridding himself of them so much as gentling them against this one particular ingress.

Severus doesn’t even feel like the few others Nizar has allowed into his thoughts. This touch is more like a soothing whisper without sound, a cool breeze over fevered or burnt skin.

“This isn’t really about me at all, though there are some contributing factors.” Severus sounds grieved. “So many times, Nizar?”

Nizar swallows down the stupid lump in his throat. “Yes.”

“We all left him, in one way or another,” Helga says quietly. “None of us expected Rowena to be the first, but when Helena and Edvard returned to Hogwarts as ghosts, she took it…very hard.”

“Then Helga followed me into shadow,” Rowena says.

“Even I left him,” Salazar whispers. “He might not remember it, but I said my farewells to my brother. We left both him and Godric alone.”

“We all did,” Galiena says. “Father never tried to cling—he always knew it wouldn’t be right. Children grow up, after all. But Brice and Elfric died. I lived far away, and when you both have tasks that eat up all your time, even Apparition will not grant much. Uncle’s fate we know *now*, but we did not until very recently.”

“Then there are so many early losses,” Salazar adds, “and those sorts of losses leave terrible scars.”

“And they are not the sort of scars that fade.” Severus blinks several times as he mentally steps back. “I am much acquainted with my own. Do you remember what we discussed about Potter’s Occlumency training that Albus wished me to inflict?”

Nizar waits for Severus to exit his thoughts before he lets his defences return, and then shakes his head when there is a lingering sense of disorientation. “Yes. I’m still angry about that, no matter that I’m now angry about...well, me. No, this has not gotten any easier to deal with in the last day.”

“I’ve been awake for most of this week, and it hasn’t gotten any easier,” Severus responds. “You were right, though. Given what lingers in your thoughts—it would have been torture for you, even then.”

“Fucking Albus Dumbledore,” Nizar mutters. “I’d like to strangle whoever taught that man mind magic.”

Severus wraps his arms around Nizar. “I don’t think that’s the problem at all.”

“When I went to Diagon Alley after that meeting in London for the Order, there was a poster. A missing child poster.” Nizar tries to figure out what he means to say. “Of...me. Him. Fuck,” he mutters in disgust. Severus’s silent laughter stirs the hair over Nizar’s forehead. “The child didn’t seem to appreciate the attention. But his eyes—I didn’t recall anything of *him*, but for just a moment, I think I remembered *her*. I didn’t feel anything, though. It was like seeing a brief glimpse of a stranger.”

“I’m sorry for that. You should—you know more of Lily through what I’ve said of her, don’t you?”

“At least it was all informative.” Nizar forces his shoulders to relax, to breathe out the rest of the tension that collected in his body during a stupid panic attack. “I don’t mind, you know. This may sound terrible, but there is nothing left in my memories that makes me wish to recall any of it at all.”

“It isn’t right, but I understand.” Severus hesitates before continuing to speak. “At the Ministry yesterday morning—I don’t know what magic you were invoking, but there was a moment when your eyes were that same shade of emerald green you were born with. More so, actually, as your eyes were literally glowing.”

“Mm. Silver edge to it?” Nizar asks, unsurprised.

Severus nods. “It would have been a shock if I’d seen it without already knowing what your brother had done. The green and silver would be...?”

“The Deslizarse family magic, yes,” Nizar answers the unfinished question. “The very reason Slytherin House’s colors are silver and green. I would ask Salazar, but I’m almost certain that’s never changed, before or after the adoption. There was a very distant familial connection at play, but we could never figure out exactly what it was.”

“Not merely time being a circle?” Severus asks in a dry voice.

“No. At least, I don’t think so. He might know more of it by now than I do.” Nizar feels panic try to well up again and shoves it ruthlessly aside; he can ask this question. He *has* to. “You had asked to see me today—yesterday, I mean. I—what was—are we—”

Severus grasps his face and kisses him. It’s so unexpected that Nizar’s hands flail about in surprise. When he can comprehend what’s happening, he grabs hold of Severus’s shirt.

“As I told your brother yesterday, Nizar: you chose an idiot,” Severus says when they break apart.

Nizar is too confused to glare at him. “Stop impugning my sense of taste. You’re not an idiot. I didn’t even ask—”

“But you tried to,” Severus interrupts him, as if the attempt is monumentally important. “You actually did try. Nizar, I’m a deeply flawed person. I believe I don’t deserve you in the slightest, but those same flaws mean that I have no intention of letting you go. I’m too much of a selfish bastard.”

Nizar swallows. “Not that I’m complaining, but what changed your mind?”

“My mind did not *change*,” Severus retorts, but then he smiles. “1971 until now, Nizar. Twenty-four years. That is what I choose to remember when I look at you.”

* * * *

“I assume you’re going to put in an appearance at breakfast before the students take the train home at ten?” Severus asks him while Nizar washes his face again in the bathroom sink.

“It seems politically expedient, if only so no idiot takes back a rumor to Voldemort implying he actually inconvenienced me yesterday.”

“He did inconvenience you,” Severus points out.

Nizar dries his face with a fresh towel. “Temporarily. Not even close to being the same thing.” He puts on a clean robe and is finally ready to at least pretend to face the Great Hall with some semblance of dignity. “Tea. I desperately need more tea to see out the rest of this day.”

“Addict,” Severus accuses.

“You restarted the addiction. It’s your own fault,” Nizar replies, smiling.

They’re halfway down the stairs, with Nizar taking a break on the third floor landing because why stairs, why does he live on the seventh floor, *why*, when he realizes Severus is biting back another smile. “And what is it this time?”

“Please, at first opportunity, I wish to view a Pensieved memory of the time you punched Merlin,” Severus requests, clenching his jaw so hard against revealing humor that Nizar worries the man will crack his teeth.

Nizar smiles. He’s not sure in the haze that was yesterday when he would have mentioned that, but it’s a request easily granted. “It’s a date.”

“We have odd dates, then.”

“So far, yes, but I like what we’ve done compared to what was normal a thousand years ago. Dating in my day was a lot of drinking followed by waking up the next morning in hopes you were still going to remember the person next to you.”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “I really cannot fathom you doing so.”

“Once was definitely enough. At least it was Peregrine, who just looked confused by that particular revelation. He’d been so certain he liked women, the poor daft sod.”

“And others observed otherwise?” Severus asks.

“Godric was placing wagers on when he would figure it out. Helga won, but then, she had a fondness for those of the same sex, herself.”

Nizar gives Severus a full two minutes, counted out in his head, before he enters the Great Hall. “And there is our Fearless Leader!” George declares the moment he sees Nizar.

“Are you feeling murderous today, Fearless Leader?” Fred asks, grinning. Nizar decides that the rumor mill must have been busy since Friday morning.

“That depends entirely on how much tea is left by the time I get to the table,” Nizar says with a smile, which makes George wisely drag Fred out of the way.

Miss Weasley is next. “Rumor going around the school is that you met He-Who-Is-Stupid yesterday morning.”

“Rumor is true,” Nizar replies, glad that he’s not being swarmed by bodies, just questions.

“How did that go, then?” Miss Parkinson asks.

“He-Who-Is-Noseless now also has a permanent hole in the side of his face. It went very well.” Parkinson lifts both eyebrows, but doesn’t look displeased by the news. “Oh, and Kanza got to Petrify some of the noseless walking corpse’s friends. She’s quite satisfied with herself and is napping in my quarters.”

“You’re all right, then?” Minerva asks once he’s seated between herself and Aurora.

“I am.”

“Then your grooming could use more precision,” Aurora points out, smirking at her plate.

“Grooming? I stabbed two people yesterday! I can skip a day of shaving if I like,” Nizar retorts.

Nizar looks up halfway through the meal, feeling like he’s missed something obvious—sort of like when he read a letter three times before realizing it was telling him that Salazar was still alive. He digs a quill and a folded piece of paper out of his robe, Vanishes the scribbled notetaking from one side, and begins writing as his gaze drifts around the Great Hall.

To anyone else, his unfocused gaze probably lends him an air of daydreaming, but instead what he is doing is paying very particular attention to what the magic in the air is telling him. Fifteen students in the Hall would not appreciate that fact very much if they were aware of his scrutiny.

Odd how he couldn’t sense anything like this before. Yesterday’s blood magic nonsense is probably to blame, making the scent easier to discern and follow. He uses almost no effort at all to trace blood magic right to its varying sources, all of whom are directly linked to Voldemort. The sixteenth is Severus, which feels different to Nizar’s senses. Even the scent isn’t quite the same.

Rejection. It’s different because Severus doesn’t want it, even if he can’t get rid of the Dark Mark on his own.

Voldemort understood enough of blood magic to know the nature of consent in such a binding mark, but little else. All of these Marks are created and maintained in the exact same manner.

Crass, Nizar thinks in professional displeasure. Blood magic and necromancy should not be used to solve every problem one has, especially when one is very bad at it.

Minerva leans in close while Dumbledore is in the midst of officially closing out the first half of the school term. “Why those names?”

Nizar glances at her without turning his head. “They’re all seventeen.”

Minerva hisses in a shocked breath. “Merlin, no,” she whispers, but otherwise her expression does not change.

“Merlin wouldn’t be nearly so stupid as to allow himself to be chained to another this way.” Nizar makes a copy of the paper, folds it, and passes it along to Minerva under the cover of their remaining serving dishes and goblets. “You and your fellow Heads of Houses need to know of this. It may be too late to convince some of them to change their minds, but as long as they’re in school, they’re not with *him*.”

“And Albus?”

“If you must,” Nizar says, affecting a lack of concern. “But you, Pomona, Severus, and Filius have more direct contact with these students. They know you. They might *fear* him.”

Minerva nods her understanding. “Any plans for the holiday?” she continues in a normal voice.

“None so far, but I might try spending some time away from this castle. But for brief moments, I haven’t been away from Hogwarts since 1017.”

Minerva smiles at him. “Then such a vacation is long overdue, I should think.” She leans in close. “For Merlin’s sake, take *him* with you!”

Nizar gives her an innocent look. “I’ve no idea who you mean.”

She rolls her eyes. “I’m not blind, Nizar, especially not after your delightful Sana Visio.”

“That’s good, then, as blindness should have been the opposite result of ingesting that potion.”

Minerva hides her smile behind her teacup. “I’m going to find out eventually.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Minerva dearest.” Nizar flips over the sheet of paper and puts his quill back to it as moment of inspiration strikes—or insanity. Over the years he’s learned that the only difference between the two is often the outcome. He takes notes while drinking tea at the same time, using the written word to stir memory when it won’t stir itself.

“No, that’s not enough,” he mutters, and Summons both books from his private study, paging through them while still trying to take notes. At least the elves remember not to steal his tea.

“What are you doing?”

Nizar glances up in response to Severus’s question. “I’m—” Then he realizes how silent it is in the Hall. “Where did everyone go?”

“They left. Fifteen minutes ago. You didn’t notice,” Severus replies. “I repeat: what are you doing?”

“Oh.” Nizar rests his fingers against the upper bones of his eye sockets and presses in, trying to relieve a headache. “Blood magic. Sacrificial blood magic. It isn’t supposed to work that way.”

“Work what way?” Severus asks, seating himself in Minerva’s abandoned chair.

“That privacy spell, please,” Nizar requests, and Severus nods, casting the nonverbal spell. Most of the sound of echoes bouncing off stone fades from his hearing. “You recall that in the *Pensieve*, Dumbledore told me that Voldemort used base necromancy to nullify part of the blood magic protection on—him. Me. Whoever.”

“I recall. I also recall breaking that Pensieve.”

“Yes, but Gedeloc probably doesn’t give a fuck.” Nizar taps his quill to the paper. “The thing is, sacrificial blood magic isn’t supposed to work that way. Blood-and-Bone shouldn’t have been able to do a damned thing to that protective magic if it was as it had been the day it was bestowed.”

“You—the child was a Horcrux by that point.” Severus looks unhappy just saying the words. “Would that have given the Dark Lord the ability to alter that protection?”

Nizar shuts both books. “No. That blood protection was a defence against anything to do with Voldemort. I have a theory, and I don’t like it.

“Dumbledore shouldn’t have been able to tie part of that sacrificial protection to a physical address. A blood sacrifice is about choice, and since it wasn’t his choice, it should have been beyond his means. He did it anyway. Given that he acted like he’d done nothing out of the ordinary, then his means concern me, but I doubt he’ll be advertising them at any point soon.”

Nizar taps his fingers among the table, fighting for clarity on a theory that wants to remain nebulous. “The locating device on Dumbledore’s desk didn’t point to Petunia and Dudley Dursley, even though they’re blood relatives of...of mine. Wow, that really hurt to say.”

“You’ve listened to my complaining about Petunia enough,” Severus says.

“Exactly my point. Regardless, that device should have pointed to them, blood protection or no blood protection.”

“I would think it wouldn’t point to them, else anyone with access to your blood would have been able to find the child.” Severus grimaces. “This is not getting any less awkward.”

Nizar chooses to simply ignore the awkward for now. “The point of the sacrifice would be to hide them, yes, but it must *always* have worked before the Blood-and-Bone ceremony, else Dumbledore’s stupid creation would have been useless for ten years before Hogwarts, and two months out of every summer from 1991 to 1995. Unless it never worked at all.”

Severus shakes his head. “I’ve seen it used in the summer of 1993.”

“Not that, then.”

Severus frowns when he tries to read Nizar’s notes. “Please stick to one language at a time. What happened to that sacrificial protection, do you think?”

“I think some of the magic was destroyed when Dumbledore tied part of it to that house’s physical address in Surrey,” Nizar says slowly, “which would have severely weakened the

protection. I believe Voldemort's necromancy destroyed a great deal of the rest, if not all of it. I don't think it's existed in any useful fashion since the twenty-fourth of June."

"Wait, let me clarify," Nizar continues as Severus gives him a look that speaks of quiet, developing rage. "The part of it that was ripped free and placed on the physical address still exists. I could tell something of it remained when I was at the house this past Tuesday evening. But it's not what it should be. It's warped, twisted—it wouldn't have safeguarded Potter at all, as by shifting it from person to residence..."

Severus scowls in a way that doesn't bode well for someone's survival. "The magic would have stopped responding to the child, and would have come under the dominion of the people who owned the house."

"Petunia and Vernon Dursley. Or perhaps just Vernon. I've no idea how non-magical property is handled nowadays, but the change meant that the magic would be paying attention to contracted ownership, not a designated person."

"Then it never once did the child any good. Not there." Severus sounds like he's grinding his teeth.

"You're the one who said that if the blood protection was doing its job properly, it would have ejected the Dursley family out into the street. I just didn't realize how entirely *correct* you were." Nizar picks up his quill again. "You need to leave before you're observed in my company, by the way," he adds in a low voice. "There are seventh-years with the Mark in this school. Minerva will give you a copy with the list of names later."

Severs frowns. "Dammit. How many?"

"Fifteen, but it's a fairly even blend of Pure-bloods from all Houses." Nizar smiles.

"Someone once had a good idea to stick a portrait back in its original resting place over a mantelpiece in order to encourage silver-and-green-wearing students not to be completely stupid."

"I cannot for the life of me imagine who would have been intelligent enough to do that." Severus leaves before any student has the chance to wander by and find them seated alone in the Great Hall. It shouldn't matter, but Nizar is trusting his instincts, and his instincts are screaming at him not to give Voldemort any sort of excuse.

He takes advantage of the empty hall to Apparate straight to his office. The pile of graded essays is smaller than the unmarked ones, but if he distributes them now before the students take the carriages to the rail station at Hogsmeade, he has one less task to be concerned with. He uses his wand to separate them by Houses, tucks those individual bundles into his robe pockets, and wanders off to Gryffindor Tower.

Fellona's portrait smiles in greeting. "Hello, dearest. Can I help you?"

"I need to barge into the Gryffindor Common Room for a moment, Fellona."

“Of course, Nizar.” Fellona swings the entry portal wide open. It’s such a lovely improvement over the old oak rolling door that had to be physically shoved to one side.

“There is a Slytherin in our Common Room,” is the first, least intelligent observation Nizar hears.

“Good job; you can still identify me,” Nizar says to Finnigan, who flushes when he realizes the ridiculousness of his statement. The young man is getting better about verbal defence, but he spends so much time distracted by mooning over Dean Thomas it’s a wonder he ever accomplishes anything. “I have graded essays to return to those of you who were bloody sensible enough to have been done before *yesterday*.”

“How did you get in? Only Gryffindors can get in here!” Ron Weasley isn’t sputtering, but a Slytherin in the Common Room must be an extra special offence.

“Fellona was one of my students,” Nizar replies. “I was her favorite.”

“Fellona?” Weasley repeats, wrinkling his nose. “You mean the Fat Lady?”

Nizar frowns and thrusts his hand in Longbottom’s direction. “Give me your book,” he growls.

Longbottom lets out a startled *meep*. “Huh? Why?” he asks, drawing back in alarm.

“Because I’m going to beat a ginger to death with it for such blatant rudeness!”

Weasley has the sense to take several large steps back and put his arms over his head in self-defence. “That’s the only name we know!” Weasley shouts before Nizar can act on his threat. “We didn’t know her name!”

“Has anyone ever thought to ask?” Nizar glances around at several years’ worth of Gryffindors. “Anyone? Ever?”

“Most of the portraits are either huffy about being asked, or they’re shouting their names from the walls,” Miss Bell finally says. “I think we all get into the habit really fast of just not asking.”

“Because heaven forbid you might have to talk to someone.” Nizar stares up at the ceiling. “Dear gods, manners. Why does no one in this century seem to have them?”

Granger comes down the stairs from the girls’ dormitory. “Hello, Professor. There wasn’t anything wrong with my essay, was there?”

Nizar stares at her. “You know what? I’m going to put almost everyone’s essays on this table, and if you try to take one that doesn’t belong to you, you won’t like the results. Weasley, Longbottom, Bell, and Spinnet: please make sure the rest of your House knows where they can find them. Granger, Fred, George, Black—the four of you, step out here with me.” Granger gulps audibly; Black turns pale. Fred and George aren’t bothered, but like Miss Lovegood, they don’t seem to be bothered by much of anything.

It's a relief to get out of that Common Room and away from so many staring, bewildered eyes. "Fellona, this is Fred and George Weasley, Edward Black, and Hermione Granger, who will be informing all of your charges to use your proper name."

Fellona puts her clasped hands to her breast. "Oh, thank you! No one has cared in so long, Nizar!"

"I care," Nizar replies, smiling at her.

"Are you *certain* there was nothing wrong with my essay?" Granger frets the moment Fellona closes the portrait hole behind them, blocking out the noise of the Common Room.

Nizar does his best not to start laughing. "No wonder the entire staff despairs of you. Miss Granger, at twenty-four feet, your essay was well written, very detailed, and you have the top marks in your year for Defence. Congratulations."

Granger grins, hops up and down, and then hugs him before she goes wide-eyed and leaps back as if he's a hot coal. "Uh—sorry, sir!"

"No, that was...fine," Nizar says, trying not to feel baffled. "You are brilliant and will grow up to be terrifying, Miss Granger, even if all you do is drown your enemies in paperwork."

Granger beams while Fred and George try not to fall over each other laughing. "And now you get blackmail to hang over their heads," he says of the twins, who abruptly stop chortling. "They have the highest marks in seventh-year Defence at the moment, though they're tied with Miss Parangyo of Slytherin."

"Slytherin? And not a Ravenclaw?" Black asks curiously.

"Not in seventh-year. You know, Miss Parangyo is single," Nizar tells George.

George's eyes grow comically wide. "Weren't you the one who warned us not to wrestle Miss Parangyo?"

Nizar rolls his eyes. "You're an adult. Learn to set some ground rules."

Black has his fingers stuffed in his ears. "Learn not to mention that around me, oh my God!"

"Mister Black, you and Astoria Greengrass are tied for top marks on this essay for third-year Defence. Congratulations," Nizar says, making the boy forget all about inappropriate wrestling—or at least ginger-wrestling.

"Me?" Black repeats in disbelief. "But I'm terrible at it!"

"No, you're still learning the practical aspects. Your academic understanding is fine," Nizar reassures him.

"Who took fourth-year?" Granger asks, still bouncing on her toes.

“Miss Lovegood. If anyone in her House understood what she is truly capable of, they’d never steal her shoes again.”

“Shi—uh, I mean, nothing, I mean—I have to go help Luna find her shoes! I almost forgot! Thanks, sir!” Black exclaims, and races off.

“Might as well fill in the blanks. Sixth year?” Fred asks innocently.

“Cho Chang,” which makes the twins flush with guilt and for Miss Granger’s delighted expression to falter. “For obvious reasons, I should think.”

“Yeah. Bugger,” Fred whispers.

George tries to sound a little bit more upbeat when no one else says anything. “You have a good holiday, Professor. Aside from a visit to Diagon Alley, we plan to take over Hogwarts while everyone is gone.”

Nizar points at the twins. “If you get caught and aren’t available when the term resumes, you know the consequences.”

“That’s why we don’t get caught,” Fred says in a tone of wounded pride. “Come on, Hermione! Let’s go lord your academic prowess above the others while we pretend to be dunderheads!”

“You *are* dunderheads,” Granger says scathingly, but she’s smiling.

“Gentlemen, please escort her back inside and assure your fellow Gryffindors that I bored you all to tears.”

“I could manufacture some tears,” George offers.

“Don’t do that. Then they’ll just be convinced that someone died,” Nizar says. “In! Go finish packing.”

George and Fred salute him. “Aye, sir!”

“Bugger. Off,” Nizar repeats, amused, and waits until the portrait hole closes again.

Nizar stops by Ravenclaw Tower to repeat the process, informing Miss Lovegood and Miss Chang of their success. Then he has to go all the way downstairs to the barrels near the kitchen, which he still regards in utter dismay. Viking does not mean, “Crawl through a barrel.” It usually meant drinking them dry first, and then setting them on fire. The original entry to the den Helga once called her own had descending stairs and a real fucking door.

First-year Hufflepuff Rose Zeller and second-year Owen Cauldwell are both happy to take top marks for their respective years. Nizar warns Cauldwell to find a new creature to obsess over before writing his next paper, finds a place to hide, and Apparates out so he doesn’t have to crawl through the damned barrel again.

“Just me?” Miss Parangyo looks disappointed when Nizar gives her back her essay in the Slytherin Common Room. “No one else took top marks in their year but me?”

“Miss Greengrass is sharing top marks with Mister Black of Gryffindor for third-year, but she and her sister have already departed Hogwarts for the holiday. Otherwise...unfortunately, yes, it’s just the two of you. Too many Slytherins spend far too much time thinking that knowledge of the Dark Arts is the same as knowing how to defend against them, when that’s actually just step one.”

Nizar keeps his voice loud enough to carry throughout the room. “Voldemort learned that on Friday morning, to his utter detriment. Or did that rumor somehow not make it downstairs?” he asks, glancing at Warrington, Pucey, Crabbe, Bole, Montague, Goyle, Davis, Peebles, and the Carrow twins as he speaks. Warrington flushes beet red and stares at the floor; Davis looks away. The others pretend not to notice Nizar’s regard.

He goes over to the Common Room fireplace and flops down on the sofa, signaling that he has no plans on vacating the room anytime soon. The other Slytherins go back to what they were doing, though the ones happily leaning towards future careers as Death Eaters escape to the dormitories or treat him to dark glowers that Nizar ignores. After twenty minutes, Draco Malfoy and Theo Nott both come over and sit down on the sofa with him. Vincent Crabbe is still oblivious, but Seraphina Dolohov went home yesterday.

“You’re all right?” Nizar asks them in a low voice.

Theo nods. “I’ve been expecting it, really. Professor Snape will probably let you know, sir, but I might be late getting back in January.”

Nizar nods. “If so, then know that the essay due at the end of February is still sixteen feet, but the topic is of your choice as long as you can prove to me it’s related to magical Defence. You also have my condolences as to your father’s foolishness.”

“Thank you, sir.” Theo gets up, grips Draco’s shoulder, and wanders off to the dormitory stairwell.

“Draco?”

“I’m all right, sir.” Draco stares down at his lap. “Well. I’m not *happy*, sir, but I’m all right.”

Nizar decides Draco should feel like he’s less in the midst of an interrogation. “How is Vincent taking the news?”

Draco scowls. “He doesn’t get it,” he says in a low voice. “Vince thinks we should be *proud* that our fathers were captured, that they’re about to be revealed as Death Eaters.”

“What did you tell him?” Nizar asks softly.

“I told him of course I’m not proud. My father got *caught*,” Draco sneers, and then lowers his voice again. “That isn’t the only reason.”

“But it is a very Slytherin reason, Mister Malfoy.”

Draco nods. “Yes, sir. Professor, my mother—she wants to meet you. Well, she worded it as such that she was inviting Professor Snape, our family friend, but in her invitation to Professor Snape, she asked if he would bring you along. Christmas Day, for dinner. Well, less dinner and more the annual formal holiday party she hosts in the evening, but there is usually food involved.”

Nizar glances at Draco, intrigued. “When did this invitation arrive?”

“Before lunch on Friday,” Draco admits.

“Hm. Your mother was present yesterday morning, Draco.”

Two spots of mingling violets, blues, and pinks appear high on his cheeks. “I didn’t know, sir. Does that mean you won’t?” Draco asks without looking up.

“Your mother was very polite when circumstances did not require it. As long as she sends an owl to the school with a proper invitation for myself, I have no intention of turning down her hospitality.”

Draco gives him a relieved smile. “Thank you, sir. I’ll see you at Christmas,” he says, getting up. “I have to go finish packing.”

“As long as that stupid noseless walking corpse doesn’t try anything else stupid, then yes, you will. And Draco?” Nizar waits for Draco to turn around. “Do pass along my thanks to *all* parties involved regarding the acquisition of the book the lot of you gave me for the Solstice. I might not have had the words that morning, but it was exceptionally thoughtful.”

“I will, sir.”

* * * *

Nizar returns to his quarters to discover that he suddenly owns a cauldron. It’s not a new bronze cauldron, but it’s been cared for by someone who definitely knew what they were doing. There isn’t a hint of copper corrosion on the inside, and when he taps the cauldron with his wand, it releases a deep, pure sound like a perfectly tuned gong from the East. “Oh, that is lovely.”

Sitting beside the cauldron, wrapped in layers of thick, proper felt are stirring rods: one of glass, one of mæsling —brass—and one of solid silver. The glass is new; the mæsling and silver are not, but are as pristinely preserved as the cauldron. When Nizar picks up the bronze cauldron to inspect the bottom, he finds it was resting on a proper cast-iron base, a stabilizing element between cauldron and table.

“Is this a hint?” Nizar asks Severus when he knocks and enters a few minutes later.

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “No, it’s called Solstice.”

Nizar puts the cauldron down in surprise. “Solstice—right. That was yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“You slept through most of it, though I’d imagine you counted the best gift as the opportunity to slice Voldemort’s face,” Severus says.

“No. No, that moment just became a distant second,” Nizar murmurs, pleased and feeling just as bewildered as when his students decided that his son’s words needed to be available for anyone to purchase in print. “Thank you.”

Severus wraps his arms around Nizar from behind and rests his head against Nizar’s hair. “You really do have trouble accepting gifts from others, don’t you?”

“I’m a lot better about it if there is a reason for it, and today there was.”

“And if there is no reason?” Severus asks.

Nizar frowns, as thinking on that means trying to push aside a lot of cobwebs in his memories. “I think Salazar learned to just give me things in circumstances where it would have been a mark of extreme impoliteness for me to refuse. They all did. Helga and Orellana noticed that I wouldn’t ask, otherwise.” He lets out an amused snort. “Well, I didn’t change very much, did I?”

“The human brain sometimes likes its set patterns overly much,” Severus says. “Do you want to have lunch, or fret about such things until dinner?”

“I refuse to fret on an empty stomach. Besides, I can’t even remember what I ate for breakfast.” Nizar is glad Severus is both understanding of his irritating quirks, and that he’s willing to let them go.

Dobby pops into the room and gives them a brief head-bob of greeting. “Is it being time for lunch, Professors of Slytherin?”

“Well, that’s an effective shortcut,” Severus says. “Yes, Dobby.” The elf smiles at them and vanishes.

“Dobby,” Nizar repeats. Now there is another tip of the tongue memory that won’t come to him.

“You stole him from Lucius.”

“How the fuck does one steal a house-elf?” Nizar asks in disbelief, but Dobby Apparates back into the room with Filky, delaying Severus’s response. They have trays loaded down with a meal that might have served half the staff table. “Are you two trying to choke an elephant?”

Filky gives Nizar a stern look. “The Professor Slytherin performed powerful magic yesterday, and then he did not eat to make up for it! If the Professor Slytherin is going to act as The Protector again, he will be eating this!”

Nizar stares at her. “All right, I will, because you’re completely terrifying.”

“Good,” Dobby says decisively, while Filky huffs out an irritated breath of the long-suffering. “Dobby is happy to be seeing the Professor Slytherin act like the Protector, just like he did when the Professor Slytherin saved Dobby from a cruel master!”

“Saved you—” Nizar trails off in belated realization. “Damned house-elf magic!”

“I find that I’m not surprised he knows who you are at all. Not after the house-elf theft.” Severus gives him a bland look when Nizar glares at him.

Dobby looks up at Nizar with a somber expression. “Dobby be telling no one that the good person who freed Dobby from a terrible Master has somehow become a different sort of good person. All house-elves know who Professor Slytherin was, and who he is, and that is the way things is supposed to be. Hogwarts’ elves tell Dobby that they be waiting for you for long years to come and keep us safe.”

The hair on Nizar’s arms is trying to rise in response to something that sounds far too much like prophecy. “I don’t remember any of it. I’m glad he—I’m glad I helped you, though.”

Dobby nods. “It is being okay, Professor Slytherin. It is actions that matter, even if the memory is being lost. Dobby learned that from you, and Dobby will never forget.” Filky grabs Dobby’s hand and Disapparates them both, leaving Nizar feeling adrift.

Nizar temporarily forgets the conversation in favor of food. Filky had a valid point; it just takes a while for his appetite to return, especially if he spends part of that recovery period with a blasted hangover.

Severus waits until the end of the meal to speak again. “There is something I wish to say.”

Nizar feels like he can function again without undue flailing, so he nods. “What is it?”

“Words I managed to articulate to the portraits last night, though no one could give me a satisfactory answer.” Severus puts down his tea and averts his gaze. “Aside from a portrait in a dungeon, there is only one reason I kept living after Hallowe’en in 1981, and that reason has become moot. My vow of protection is rather redundant at this point, given that you’re as well-versed in most magic as I am, and hold other knowledge I do not—”

Nizar abandons his side of the table when Severus simply freezes in place, unable to continue. He moves the second tray aside and climbs into Severus’s lap, kissing Severus until he has no choice but to breathe or pass out.

“It was never your fault in the first place,” Nizar reminds him as their foreheads rest together. “I don’t care about that fucking prophecy and its fucking stupid implications, Severus. You did not raise that wand and you did not cast those curses.”

“I know.” Severus draws in a harsh breath. “But that has been the crux of my existence since that day in 1981, Nizar. I don’t know who the fuck I am without it.”

“But I do.” Nizar runs his fingertips down the sides of Severus’s face. “I’ve known who you are for a very long time now.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Severus chokes out.

“It is. It truly is. No matter our actions, the core of who we are doesn’t change very much. There is a difference between not knowing how to interact with others and never wishing to. If you’d wanted the latter, you wouldn’t have had a friendship to speak of. You wouldn’t have challenged yourself to brew Felix Felicis in far less than the six months that idiot Slughorn claimed was required, all because you wished to present it to another. No one does that because they’re selfish. They challenge themselves because they care.”

“You’re far too forgiving,” Severus argues.

“No.” Nizar lets his expression harden. “No, I’m really not. If you’d discovered the danger to a family and then done nothing to work against that danger, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Aside from the obvious, you’d be dead or in Azkaban.

“I’ve seen a lot of fools come through the Slytherin Common Room, and I’ve seen a lot of fools exit that room and never return. Even when I didn’t want you to leave in 1977, I never once thought I was witnessing the departure of a fool. If anything, I suspected you to be one of the few capable of recognizing that making a single choice doesn’t negate making others.”

“I thought it was the least cryptic bit of advice I’d ever received, even if it took me a while to understand what you meant,” Severus says.

“Sometimes you really have to think about advice for it to make sense, whereas an explicit statement can be easily ignored.” Nizar smiles and wipes Severus’s face dry. “Besides, you’re performing one of my blunders and overlooking something obvious.”

“You do not make *blunders*,” Severus retorts.

“Oh, yes I do, and when I do so? They’re disastrous,” Nizar counters, grinning. “Listen: you weren’t the ultimate instrument of that child’s survival, no, but you began the process that made it possible. You carried the warning to those who didn’t want to hear it from your lips, and you were stubborn enough to insist they listen. If you hadn’t done either, there would have been no hiding, no Fidelius Charm to overcome. *You* are instrumental in something that isn’t a failure at all, but a success. That makes you exactly the sort of man you’ve always been—one who wants to be better.”

Severus breathes out and relaxes against him. “You were right, you know.”

“I’m right about a lot of things. Which particular thing are you mentioning?” Nizar asks.

“I’m thinking so much on revenge for your vile way with words, for starters,” Severus growls. If that’s meant to be a detriment, it’s a complete failure.

“What, then?”

“I didn’t hate him. That child,” Severus admits. “Which, in retrospect, makes this seem rather unscrupulous.”

“Unscrupulous?” Nizar laughs aloud. “Severus, I’m over a thousand years old! Who exactly is taking advantage of whom, here?”

“Taking advantage?” Severus’s eyes gain a particular gleam. “Would you?”

“Happily,” Nizar replies. He rests his hand over the back of Severus’s neck as he bends his head to suck on Severus’s lower lip. Severus grasps the back of Nizar’s robe, his hands clenching into fists. When Nizar licks at Severus’s upper lip, Severus opens his mouth in hungry desperation. Nizar is content to allow Severus to set their pace, rocking together with Severus’s hand firmly grasping Nizar’s hip.

If there is one thing that has won over Nizar when it comes to buttons and zippers, it’s definitely related to how much faster he can get into someone’s trousers when he’s not fumbling with laces. Nizar grasps the firm curve of the prick that’s rising to meet him, and Severus releases a bitten-off moan.

“Severus,” Nizar whispers. He strokes Severus in time with the sharp, panted breaths that Severus gasps into Nizar’s ear.

Nizar lifts Severus’s free hand and licks the pad of his thumb, causing Severus’s eyes to widen. “Nizar—”

“You’re the one who wanted me to take advantage,” Nizar purrs, licking a solid line down Severus’s thumb. When he’s certain he has Severus’s full attention, he closes his mouth around the first and middle fingers of Severus’s hand and sucks hard.

“Oh my *God*,” Severus gasps, and bucks up, coming into the welcoming curve of Nizar’s hand. “Oh, God, Nizar.”

Nizar nuzzles against the side of Severus’s face, feeling completely at ease for the first time in days. His prick is throbbing as the pungent odors of fresh, clean sweat and sex mingle in the air. “Well? Do you feel taken advantage of yet?”

Severus gives him a devious look and darts forward, biting the column of Nizar’s throat in a way that never fails to make Nizar’s brain give up on higher function. “More than,” Severus rumbles against his throat, the vibration traveling up into Nizar’s throat and down to his chest.

When Severus’s long, nimble fingers wrap around his prick, Nizar releases one long exhale of exhausted relief. He needed this even before the fiasco with the scroll, but he is absolutely terrible about *asking*—

“Stop bloody thinking so much,” Severus orders him, his teeth nipping at Nizar’s throat again. Nizar clamps his hands down on Severus’s shoulders, their lips locked together as Severus brings him off with a strong and ruthless grip. He tries to bite back the cry and then Severus *cheats*, scraping the edge of his thumbnail along the head of his prick in a way that’s just shy of painful. Nizar’s head rocks back, amazed shock causing him to shout.

“Sneaky,” Nizar rasps. “Bloody hell.”

“I’m so glad your portraits have some sense of bloody discretion,” Severus responds. “And the house-elves.”

“And the basilisk.” Nizar glances over his shoulder to see Kanza lolling out in a full line of bliss as she soaks up heat from the fireplace. “Bath?”

Severus settles his chin on Nizar’s shoulder. “Only if I’m joining you.”

Nizar gives the bathtub a curious look as he helps Severus remove his shirt. He’s almost certain Hogwarts’ magic has ulterior motives, as last week he’d fallen asleep in that tub and nearly drowned himself and a book in the process—but it had still only been the width of a single person. Now it’s twice that. He’s not complaining, mind, but it’s still odd to discover that a magical castle is conspiring over Nizar’s romantic dalliances.

Not that he can even humorously refer to this relationship as a dalliance any longer. It’s gone well beyond point.

Nizar finds himself smiling. “I thought you preferred to suffer all of your mental difficulties at once?”

Severus rolls his eyes. “I fucking lied,” he says, and Nizar starts laughing.

Nizar makes sure they’re settled in such a manner in which he’s leaning against the wall of the bathtub, holding Severus in his arms. It means he can take advantage of the extra space in the bath to draw purrs out of Severus by stroking his hair, which is always fascinating.

“Are we...” Nizar tries to find the right words. “This is going to sound like a very stupid question, given our current circumstances and distinct lack of clothing, but are we all right? You’re all right with—no, I was wrong, I really don’t have the correct words for that question.”

Severus just seems amused. “You once told me that children grow up, and last night, Helga said much the same. After being able to put aside certain responses that were *not useful*... you’ve the same traits, that child and yourself. I can easily see him growing up to be you, with the right sort of guidance in place—guidance you were fortunate enough to receive. Does that answer your question?”

Nizar tilts his head to one side while drawing his fingers through Severus’s hair again. “I think it’s the only sort of answer that makes sense at this point, so yes. Change of subject?”

“Gladly.” Severus’s eyes are half-lidded in relaxation mingled with pleasure. “What color do you see of your eyes when you look in a mirror?”

“I suppose that depends on what you see,” Nizar replies.

“Grey. Hints of green.”

“Ah.” Nizar glances down at him. “I don’t see grey at all. Many shades of green and brown, a few hints of yellow, even gold—but not grey.”

“And what of mine?” Severus asks.

“Black is the best at not being anything other than what it is, at least most of the time. White likes to show off the full spectrum of colors, like water reflected through crystal. Black likes to be itself, but both white and black are the sum culmination of all colors. It’s the change in lighting that reveals more or less.”

Severus frowns. “I’m really not certain how I feel about a full color spectrum in my eyes.”

“Not *all* of the time, and it’s not like that, anyway. It’s...” Nizar thinks about it. “That black rock stuff that vehicles drive around on. What is that?”

“Asphalt. A mixture of gravel and tar, usually.”

“Right. In London, I saw several instances where there were metallic muted replications of the color spectrum in the water,” Nizar says.

“Those are oil slicks from automobiles with faulty maintenance. Refined petroleum.”

“That’s what I see more often when it comes to black, or what I see in your eyes and hair,” Nizar explains. “Black often dominates alone, but the shining metallic colors in those oil slicks are there, too.”

“You just compared my eyes to modern Muggle pollution,” Severus says in a dust-dry voice.

“You’re the one who asked.” Nizar shakes his head. “Touchy, touchy. Rainbows aren’t acceptable, oil slicks aren’t acceptable...what is acceptable, Severus?”

Severus’s long, graceful fingers trace his face. “You are.”

Two Lost Souls

Chapter Summary

"Helga will reform from the ash of her own pyre and skin me if I fuck this up."

Nizar lifts his head on Sunday morning, aware that something is pinging on the wards for his quarters. He stumbles out of bed, makes his way to the sitting room, and opens the window to a positively gigantic owl. It swoops into the room and looks displeased by what it sees before landing on the back of one of the two wooden chairs.

"Peck or claw me, and I'll hex you bald," Nizar tells the owl, which manages to seem even more offended than it had a moment ago. He unties the letter affixed to the owl's leg. "Out," he says when the owl just stares at him. "If I need to send a reply, I've my own owl."

He's subjected to another glare before the large owl takes off, leaving through the open window. Nizar slams it shut and mutters about owls that arrive too fucking early of a morning.

"It's after seven," Severus tells him. Nizar glances up from opening the letter to find Severus leaning against the hallway wall, wearing his trousers from yesterday; his white shirt is only half-buttoned.

"That is still too fucking early," Nizar declares, finally getting into the envelope. "Oh, hello, Narcissa. That was prompt."

"Perhaps she wanted to be certain she was observing every courtesy," Severus suggests. "I received my invitation very early yesterday morning. It's what awoke me. That particular owl has a great love of inconveniencing anyone who is not Narcissa, Lucius, or Draco."

Nizar reads through the letter, which is all but choking on formal phrasing. "I'm going to send them Nygell in the middle of the fucking night, then," Nizar promises, yawning.

"Nygell?"

"I had to buy an owl." Nizar waves the letter in the air. "For this very reason. Politics."

"Ah." Severus finishes buttoning his shirt, but leaves the collar undone. "You think you're going to have use for another owl, then."

Nizar lowers the letter and gives Severus a blank look. "Another?"

Severus starts to frown just before the expression clears. "Right. You wouldn't recall. That painting on your wall is of Hedwig. She was yours."

Nizar looks at the painting of the snowy owl. “Hedwig,” he repeats, and the owl prances on her branch in delight. “A good Cumbric name. I’m glad to finally know it.” She hoots at him in pleasure.

“To answer your question: after the Ministry? Yes, I do think there is going to be a need for formal communication. Some Death Eaters are always going to be too stupid to adapt to new ideas, but others are going to be reminded that Voldemort failed to defeat an enemy every time they see his face. I’m assuming the resulting damage is impressive.”

Severus grants him a lazy, pleased smirk. “Exceptionally so. Then Narcissa is merely the first to see the situation for what it is.”

“From something you said, I believe she did before this. Lucius, however—he really believes that complete twaddle about blood purity. For Lucius to change his mind, he would either really have to feel Voldemort’s disfavor, or truly come to believe that Voldemort puts Draco at risk. The fact that he didn’t realize at once that Voldemort was a risk to his own son does not make either seem very likely.”

“I think it would be easier to alter this planet’s orbit around the sun,” Severus says in agreement. “Breakfast?”

“At this point, I’m not going back to sleep, so I suppose that’s a wise idea.”

The elves bring them breakfast, including a tea tray with three cups on it, not two. Beneath the third cup is a slip of paper. When Nizar pulls it out, it reads: *Knock, knock*.

Nizar grins. “Is company acceptable, Severus?”

“Will it keep me from tea?” Severus counters, pouring a cup while Nizar is distracted by the note.

“No. It’s Salazar.”

Severus nearly overflows the teacup before he catches himself and lowers the pot. “Ah.”

“What?” Nizar asks, concerned. Severus is holding himself incredibly still, his eyes a bit too wide.

“I know what you’ve said about getting past the idea of the Founders as legends, Nizar, but I still say I grew up familiar with yourself and your existence. Salazar Slytherin is the creator of my House.”

Nizar grins at him. “You’re nervous. That’s adorable.”

“Fuck. You,” Severus retorts.

Nizar does a very good job of not laughing in response. “You two didn’t work any of this out yesterday?”

“Not really, no,” Severus replies, still glaring at Nizar. “We both had other concerns that did not revolve around proper introductions.”

“Fair point,” Nizar admits, since all of those concerns had been his fault. “I can ask him to come back later.”

“No.” Severus sighs. “He’s your brother. I have to get used to his presence at some point, and I’d rather it be sooner instead of later—especially if you are going to be dabbling in politics.”

“I was trained by magicians who’d all been raised as high-ranking nobility. I don’t *dabble*. Dobby!” Nizar calls, and waits for the house-elf to appear. “Please tell Salazar, wherever he’s lurking, that he can come in at any time.”

The house-elf is all but jumping up and down in excitement. “Dobby will be telling the other Slytherin so!” he exclaims, and Disapparates.

Salazar appears where the elf departed from a moment later. Nizar stands, giving him a concerned look; Salazar seems worn and tired compared to how bright-eyed he’d been yesterday morning. “There is this brilliant invention, Sal. It’s called *sleep*.”

Salazar gives him a baleful look before hugging him. “I’m aware, but some of us had rough nights. You look better, though.”

“Passing out for nearly twenty-four hours will do that.” Nizar gestures for Severus to stand up. “It’s been brought to my attention that you two haven’t been formally introduced.”

“He did mention that we’ve met,” Severus says dryly.

“The Underground doesn’t count—you didn’t point a pistol at him, did you?” Nizar asks, suspicious.

Salazar finally smiles. “No, that was done by another. If it makes either of you feel any better, it was a magically disabled firearm.” Severus mutters something that is definitely not polite in regards to that idea.

“It still doesn’t count. Professor Severus Prince Snape, Potions Master of Wizarding Great Britain, this is my idiot brother. Idiot brother?” Nizar prompts. “If you’ve forgotten your manners in nine centuries, you’ll find yourself as bald as that portrait in the Entry Hall.”

Salazar reaches across the table and clasps Severus’s hand. “Properly, then: I am Salazar Fernan, Marqués de Castilla y León durante el reinado de Juan Carlos I, Casa de Deslizarse de Gipuzkoa. I’m glad to meet you under more pleasant circumstances, and wearing my own face, no less.”

Severus narrows his eyes. “Let me guess: there have been other times aside from this past October.”

Salazar grins. “Yes, there have been.”

“When?”

“Various times from 1977 through 1982,” Salazar replies. “I had my eye on quite a number of you, for all I couldn’t act on it.”

Severus frowns in response. “Then your Underground existed during the first war, as well.”

“It did, yes.” Salazar spies the remaining available teacup and takes it, filling it from the pot. “Bless your addiction, little brother, even if I’m still not sure I forgive you for creating mine.”

Nizar has been watching the entire exchange with his arms crossed. “How the fuck is the monarchy of Spain still recognizing you?”

“Because I’m not dead,” Salazar answers, sipping tea before he conjures a chair to sit in. “If they want to name another magical Marqués or Marquésa for Castile and León, I have to approve of them, even though none are of my bloodline any longer. Quite an inconvenience for all those involved, myself included.”

Severus slowly sits down after Nizar does so. “Others are aware of the fact that you’re not dead.”

“Only the monarchy, and they’d rather not know at all.” Salazar tilts his head at Severus. “You’ve the look of a man who has questions he dearly wants to ask.”

“A few, though I’m still having difficulty wrapping my head around the idea of your actual, continued existence,” Severus replies.

Salazar snorts out a laugh. “Severus, I’m one thousand twenty-five years old. I spend quite a bit of my time attempting to do much the same.”

Severus glances at Nizar before looking at Salazar again. “I’m not sure where to even begin.”

“Pick the more intriguing puzzles. Those are always fun,” Salazar says.

Severus lifts both eyebrows. “And the more revealing of the person asking the question.” Salazar grins in acknowledgement. “All right, then. Why adopt a child who was already a member of your family line? Would it not create a conflict?”

“No. That’s science fiction nonsense. There was a time loop at play, yes—Nizar is my brother because I sent him to become my brother, so I had to be here to send him there. However, we really are related through a distant cousin of my father’s line. Do you recall Eneko Heredia, Nizar?”

Nizar thinks on the name without trying to focus too hard, which often chases away memory instead of bringing it closer. “Yes! He was one of the first students—ran away from his family in Ipuzko when they wanted him to stay home and learn the usual family magic instead of learning magic from his cousin in Hogewáþ.”

“That’s where that very, very distant relation by blood comes into play,” Salazar says, “descended through the Potter line. I had to track that backwards, long after the fact, and it wasn’t easy.”

“Because you would have had no idea which Potter would have led to the birth of Harry James Potter.” Severus has an intrigued look on his face. “Because he didn’t know, either.”

Salazar nods. “He didn’t, no. It’s a good thing I keep excellent records.”

Severus looks at Nizar again, almost as if asking for permission. “Since I suspect that Nizar has yet to ask: what happened on the thirty-first of July this year?”

Salazar sits back in his chair. “Nizar?”

Nizar shrugs. “I don’t mind if you speak of it. I don’t remember.”

“Very well.” Salazar doesn’t seem pleased to be discussing it, but he doesn’t hesitate to answer. “The night my brother turned fifteen, I Apparated into his room. I could do so because the protective magic attached to the house recognized me as family to Nizar *and* an ally, and that I was not there to bring harm. My brother sits up in bed, puts on those poor broken glasses, and demands to know why an old wizard has just appeared in his room.” Salazar glares at Nizar. “Old. Seriously.”

Nizar grins back. “You’re the one who just stated that you’re about to be one thousand twenty-six years old. You’re going to sit there and act insulted because I was correct?”

“Shut up.” Salazar kicks Nizar beneath the table. “I tell him I am there to save him from what is to come, because without it, chances are he would not live. He asked me how that was going to be possible.”

Salazar frowns. “He didn’t once doubt the chance of death. Gods, Severus, but those bastards left my brother in dire circumstances. I would really like to kill them all, but alas, morals and ethics. Damned things so often get in the way.”

“I know exactly how you feel.” Severus’s voice is not quite a growl of frustration, but it’s very close.

“I told my little brother that I couldn’t tell him exactly how I would save him, but if he was willing to trust that I wanted better for him than his idiot family was providing, all he had to do was choose what he wanted to bring and come forward.”

“Consent.” Severus looks surprised. “Nizar agreed to it.”

Nizar nearly blacks out when he’s slammed by a memory of unlatching an owl’s cage in the moonlight, asking her if she wanted to come with him...wherever he’s going. Hedwig. That’s Hedwig as she was in life, not her portrait.

The memory intensifies as it gains clarity. The Dursleys were not a refuge. The entire summer had been hell, with only a few birthday cards and a cake—one that was keeping him alive—to carry him through the misery, the grief...

“Nizar!” Salazar shakes him.

Nizar snaps back out of it and stares at his brother. "Sorry. I—dammit. Sometimes the Preservation Charm tries to do its job, but it is *very bad at it!*" He picks up his teacup and drains its contents, wishing it were something stronger. "I did not need that."

Severus reaches out and takes his hand. "That had emotional content attached. Not like the others."

Nizar swallows. "Yes. It did. Like I said—I didn't need that."

"I've got something to take your mind off it, then, something I believe is long overdue for both of you." Salazar smiles when Nizar looks at him. "I've a flat in London, expanded with a bit of proper magic so it's larger on the inside than the outside would have you believe. Second storey above a pub, but there are stairs from a balcony in the rear that go down into a private garden, one warded against the entry of everything except wild animals that have never felt the touch of magic. The wards are tied to a set of keys, which in turn then tie *you* into the wards once you've opened the door with them."

"What's the catch?" Nizar asks, surprised by the sudden change of subject.

"No catch at all," Salazar claims, but he's gazing at Severus. "Severus Snape, please get my brother the fuck out of this castle and introduce him to more of the bloody twentieth century. I'm still appalled that he doesn't know about telly and 'Doctor Who.'"

Severus raises his eyebrow. "You're ordering me to take your brother to London for the winter holiday."

"No, I'm literally begging you to do so. If I didn't have prior obligations, I'd drag him about myself, but...maybe also I think the two of you could stand to be away from your responsibilities here, as well."

Nizar glances at Severus. "I did tell Minerva that I wanted to get out of this castle for a few days."

"And for the first time since 1989, I don't have Slytherins staying over for the holiday. I don't need to be here at all." Severus gives Salazar a wary look. "*Is there a catch?*"

"Make my brother happy," Salazar answers in a quiet voice. "That's all I ask." He pushes back his chair and stands up. "I'll be back around three this afternoon," he says, and Disapparates on the spot.

"What is that about?" Severus asks, startled by Salazar's sudden disappearance.

"I'm going to lose him again." Nizar is trying not to feel burdened by grief that has yet to be. "That is Salazar's blunt way of trying to ensure that I'm not alone."

Severus gives him a concerned look. "Lose?"

"Salazar bargained with an Aspect to not die, but it had a time limit. When Voldemort dies... so does he."

* * * *

Severus is trying to finish eating when he realizes that Nizar is staring at the wall, his gaze unfocused. “Nizar?”

“Mm? Oh—I’m just thinking that it will be very strange to spend days away from this castle. It’s been a long time, even ignoring the portrait,” Nizar says.

“Not to mention how strange it will be for other reasons.” Severus is both looking forward to the being gone for the holiday and dreading it, but Nizar’s words yesterday...helped. He is also not discounting the absolute joy of sex that is driven by intimacy, by actual *want*.

Nizar leaves the room, muttering about putting on clothes that haven’t been subjected to cleansing charms for two days in a row. Severus rolls up his shirtsleeve while Nizar is gone, staring at the Dark Mark in silent contemplation. Technically, the last reason he kept it is a reason no longer...but he does not see Nizar wanting to reveal his past to Albus. Severus and Aberforth both agree on the fact that Albus has good intentions, but Albus doesn’t understand people the way he believes he does.

If you’d been Sorted into my House, would Albus have rejected you? Severus wonders of the child Nizar had been. It’s frustrating to realize that he can’t even guess at an answer.

Nizar returns in a clean black linen shirt and trousers. “Do you really not have much else?” Severus asks, amused by the similarity of Nizar’s wardrobe—not that he has room to cast such stones when his own wardrobe is all but interchangeable.

“I found two modern shirts in Diagon Alley, but I was saving them for times when I’m not in the school...like, oh, this upcoming trip into London,” Nizar replies. “Besides, can you see me in non-magical garb? I’d probably look ridiculous.”

Severus raises an eyebrow in response. “Your brother doesn’t look ridiculous.” If anything, Salazar makes his Muggle clothing seem like it’s an extension of his core self.

“Yes, but he’s used to it. I—” Nizar halts mid-sentence. When Severus looks up, Nizar’s gaze is locked on the Dark Mark.

“Nizar?” Severus feels his gut clench. Nizar has claimed not to mind it, but...

Nizar’s eyes flutter before he staggers in place, shaking his head. Severus jerks his shirtsleeve down to cover the Mark, hiding it from Nizar’s eyes. “What the hell just happened?”

“I have no idea, but I’m all right.” Nizar steps forward and helps Severus button the cuffs of his shirt. “Magic recognizing magic, most likely. For a minute there, I could still hear him shrieking.”

The idea that the Dark Mark recognizes the stolen magic that Nizar holds within his magical core is chilling. “Is that dangerous?”

Nizar considers his question without dismissing Severus’s concern. “I don’t think so, but I can’t recall ever dealing with anything like this before. Any people we removed soul shards from in the past—they hadn’t dealt with those soul shards for very long before we helped them. The perpetrator was also most often too fucking dead to put any sort of magic back in the victim afterwards.”

“Convenient.” Severus presses a kiss to Nizar’s forehead, which for some reason always makes Nizar grumble under his breath. It’s odd, but it’s also...endearing. “I need to go inform Albus that we’ll both be away from this castle for the duration of the holiday, and then pack. I’ll be back in time for lunch.”

“Lunch. Right.” Nizar frowns. “If it were a thousand years ago, I would know exactly how to pack, no matter how long I knew I was going to be away from home. Severus, I have no fucking idea what to pack for bloody 1995.”

“Enough clothing so that you don’t feel as if your wardrobe is subsisting on Cleansing Charms,” Severus explains, hiding a smile that might be mistaken as a response to the question, not the expression on Nizar’s face. “Work that needs to be completed before the term resumes in January. Books, if you’re so inclined; weapons, if one is paranoid.”

Nizar grins. “We’re apparently visiting Malfoy Manor on Christmas Day. One is *very* paranoid, thank you. That also means packing something meant for the occasion.”

Severus scowls as he realizes he’ll need to do the same. “Fuck. I don’t have—” He halts in surprise. “Never mind. I do have something fitting. One would think a certain Slytherin knew of this invitation in advance.”

“Good planning is when you don’t need to do any extraneous plotting at all to be prepared for anything.” Nizar smirks at him. “I’ll leave the packing of potions to you, since I haven’t had a chance to explore your gift.”

“I’ll be back soon, then.” Severus gives Nizar a quick kiss that earns him a lopsided smile before Apparating down to the dungeons.

He potentially owes a deity a favor for his lack of Slytherins this holiday. He truly has no reason to return to Hogwarts until seventh January. That does mean he needs to take the last grading of the season with him, along with the Weasley’s Self-inking Quills. They’re addicting bits of magic to use, and the little blighters did something complicated enough that he can’t figure out how to replicate the charm. He’s requesting more of the quills while suggesting they branch out on types of feathers. He’d dearly like to have a Self-inking quill made from a male resplendent quetzal’s tail, though he has the normal variety already, chosen due to the bird’s association with Quetzalcoatl, freedom, and plant growth. He’s a Slytherin Potions Master, and very much in a position to find value in all three traits.

Severus slips on his jacket and decides to forgo a robe for now. He does, however, pack one of his lightweight robes and a cloak, as well as the silken wool robe Nizar gave him last

week. He has no idea what sort of situation he's going to walk into with Nizar beyond "Christmas Dinner," but if he's learned anything in the last twenty years, it's that presentation among the Pure-blood set bloody well matters.

He thinks about it before wrapping the gifted tarot deck in cloth and packing it, as well. He has no idea why, no divinatory spark beyond those cards, but he trusts his instincts.

Say it, Severus tells himself, staring at the mirror in his bathroom after he combs through his hair and packs up any remaining necessities. Nizar has said those words to you. Why can't you say them in return?

Nizar knows of every terrible thing Severus ever uttered about James or Harry Potter, and never held it against him—he still doesn't, even with certain truths revealed. He's never asked Severus to be anything other than what he is, never asked Severus to behave a certain way beyond the simple rules of life as a Slytherin.

Severus. My name is Severus.

Severus. Mutilated Latin: to sever. I think...I think I knew a magician with that name once, but I don't recall much. I do remember that he was very talented. Perhaps you will share in that trait.

Latin was in common use in magical communities a thousand years ago. It could be a coincidence...and yet Severus is beginning to wonder if it was a slip of memory, and Nizar was referring to Severus himself. He's not sure he ever wants to ask.

Severus picks up his bag, which looks no larger and is no heavier than if it was empty, and then shrinks it down before pocketing it. He double-checks to make certain his Floo connection is sealed off and his quarters' warding is active. Then he Apparates to his office to close the Floo and ward that door for the season. He also repeats a habit he always relies on when traveling: a selection of potions for emergencies go into his jacket pocket, though this time he includes more than usual. Then he frowns and adds a large phial of a hangover cure.

"The entire holiday?" Albus seems surprised when Severus announces his intentions. "That's the first time since...1989, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"And Nizar as well." Albus gives Severus an expectant look.

"Someone has politely asked for an introduction to the twentieth century. I'm providing it," Severus explains in a flat voice, as if he'd rather be doing anything else. Albus is intelligent enough to possibly discern otherwise, but that doesn't mean Severus is going to ever bloody tell him so.

When he walks back up to Nizar's quarters, Nizar is just stepping out of his bedroom, buttoning the last of the silk-covered buttons on the gold-embroidered long vest, the one Nizar claims is probably Salazar's. "That didn't take long."

“If I’ve forgotten anything, I can Apparate here and retrieve it,” Severus says. “That’s more flash than I expected.”

“Flash—fancy. Ah.” Nizar glances down at the vest. “Severus, I own nothing that doesn’t qualify as me being drastically overdressed. Besides, this way Salazar can whinge if it’s his, and I can tell him off for stealing mine.”

Salazar arrives just after lunch. Severus honestly wonders if the man has set the house-elves to spying on them just so his entrances are well timed. He spies Nizar and pats the long vest Nizar is wearing. “Isn’t this mine?”

“Probably, but its twin that belongs to *me* happens to be missing!” Nizar shoots back. “I wonder how that came about?”

Salazar gives the fabric a confused look. “I’m wondering how this one is still *intact*.”

“Blame the house-elves. There are so many Preservation Charms still wrapped around my quarters that it takes days for food to go off. I checked; two weeks for a slice of bread to mold, while I dealt with two weeks of elves who were offended that I wouldn’t let them get rid of it.”

“Ah. That’s why Filky muttered under her breath for two weeks about odd professors,” Severus says. “I spent that entire time trying to figure out what I’d done to deserve the honor.”

Salazar tugs on Nizar’s vest with a thoughtful frown. “If there is any of the other silk left, bring out a bit that you don’t mind losing. I want this back, and I know you’ll not give it unless I have something to trade.”

“You’re damned right I won’t.” Nizar disappears into his bedroom for a moment and comes back out to the sitting room with a silk tunic in his hands. If Severus is judging the length properly, that one didn’t see a modern refit from the elves.

Salazar examines the black silk, which has embroidered bands at cuffs and collar but no other ornamentation. Nizar also passes over a length of what looks like unused silver embroidery edging. “Take that off. I can’t do this if you’re wearing it,” Salazar mutters.

“Good point.” Nizar flicks open most of the vest’s buttons by running his finger alongside the strip.

“That’s cheating,” Severus remarks.

“Yes, but I actually like undoing your buttons,” Nizar replies, grinning.

“Why,” Severus asks, “*why* did you turn that into innuendo?”

“Don’t get him started.” Salazar waits impatiently for Nizar to pull off the vest. “Gods-awful flirt if he’s in the mood. Someone actually complained in Court about him once, saying Nizar needed to be married off so it would stop.”

“And how did that turn out?” Severus asks, knowing already that Nizar never married.

“I told the king that the moment he fucked a sheep at the edge of a cliff, I’d marry, but not a minute before.” Nizar smiles as he hands Salazar the vest. “Funny how no one breathed a word of the necessity of marriage after that.”

“Because to do so would have been to imply that the king needed to be getting on with the sheep-fucking.” Salazar lays both the tunic and the vest out on the rug. “I still don’t know how Nizar didn’t earn a prison sentence for that.”

“Because I’m bloody charming, and King Alfonso liked me, whereas you he had to continue to professionally dislike because you killed his cousin and namesake.”

Salazar scowls. “He fucking deserved it!”

“Didn’t you say similarly of Merlin?” Severus asks Nizar, biting back a smile.

Nizar shrugs. “To be fair, they both fucking deserved it, but I didn’t execute Merlin, I just punched him.”

“The look on Godric’s face, too.” Salazar smiles in fond remembrance. “You’d have done as well to punch God in Godric’s eyes.”

“I hope you know what the original looked like,” Nizar says as Salazar raises his wand. “Because I don’t.”

“I still have a scrap of it packed away under every Preservation Charm I could manage,” Salazar tells him. “Even magically woven silk will only last so long unless it’s kept hidden away.”

The feel of magic becomes a warm weight in the air. Severus keeps wanting to hold his breath against the sensation, but he has to learn not to. This is Hogwarts herself, the strength of the castle’s magic surging forth as it attempts to wrap Salazar Slytherin in the embrace of a friend.

The black tunic loses its shape until it matches the vest; the extra material is used to thicken the original silk to the same consistency as the vest. The silver embroidery is laid out and rewoven until it becomes gleaming silver threads in a pattern that is a match for the other’s gold.

“And now the much more difficult part. Helga will reform from the ash of her own pyre and skin me if I fuck this up. *Invocar esmeralda*.” Salazar reaches out and catches the raw green stone that appears in midair before it can fall.

Nizar crosses his arms, watching Salazar work. “Here’s something they should still be teaching in Transfiguration’s N.E.W.T. classes.”

Salazar holds out the stone, glaring at it with his wand raised. The raw emerald begins to unravel like a fine green thread, which is then added to the jerkin as a highlight for the silver.

Salazar lifts up the new black vest, embroidered in literal silver and emerald thread, complete with the same line of buttons and the slits up the sides for ease of movement. “There. Now is it a trade?”

Nizar scoops up the other vest and throws it at Salazar’s face. “Yes.” Salazar returns the favor, and Nizar stares down at the silk, his fingers tracing silver and emerald. “I would have botched it. I didn’t remember enough of the detail.”

Salazar mimics the embroidery tracing without noticing that Nizar is doing the same. “Gold with bronze highlights. Helga and I always had such a fondness for gold upon black.”

“Rowena’s silver, bronze, and blue,” Nizar murmurs. “Bronze over blue silk with silver jewelry.”

“And then there was Godric, who wouldn’t put on anything but linen and leathers unless we were forcibly dragging him to Court to pay due to his own blasted king.”

“Remember when Helga hexed him because he wouldn’t stop whinging about the hose?” Nizar asks.

Salazar nods, smiling. “I don’t think she’d have bothered, but it was Æhelred, and the poor idiot needed his earls to at least *pretend* to want to be present.”

“And then Æthelred promptly fucked up by deciding all magic-workers were evil.” Nizar sighs as he puts on the recreated vest. “And thus came the tradition of the Danegold, all because the idiot ditched his kingdom’s strongest protectors.”

Salazar strips off the leather jerkin he’s wearing and puts on the gold-embroidered vest. “Good. For a moment I was convinced it wouldn’t fit. Oh, and it was sort of funny to watch the King of England try to claim Griffon’s Door in the name of the Crown, mostly because they couldn’t bloody find it. Godric didn’t take apart the Unplottable magic for most of Griffon’s Door until later, once Sedemai safeguarded the door itself.”

“Let me guess. Griffon’s Door is now known as a little village called Godric’s Hollow,” Nizar says, amused.

“That is not so much a guess as it is intellectual awareness, *hermanito*.”

Severus stares at the two brothers. The vests are styled like sleeveless jerkins and are almost knee-length, embroidered by the threads of precious metals. It’s like seeing royal bloody bookends standing together, and it’s a damned impressive sight. “One: this conversation is fascinating, and I’m now glad I decided to pack a very large phial of an excellent hangover cure, because I know exactly how part of this holiday is going to go.”

“Oh, it survived?” Salazar grins at Nizar. “Death in a Bottle?”

“And it’s just as potent, brother.”

“TWO,” Severus says over them, trying not to smile, “I think I should take both of you with me in response to Madam Malfoy’s invitation to Christmas Dinner in Wiltshire.”

“That could be fun,” Nizar muses at the same time that Salazar says, “I am happily pretending to be dead, thank you.”

“But not for much longer, you’re not.” Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Salazar gazes at Severus in apparent delight. “Little brother, if I didn’t approve before, I certainly do now.”

“It’s not your bloody decision!” Nizar retorts.

“I’m eldest; yes it is.” Salazar nods at Severus. “That is very much the plan, though I hadn’t expected to become a public figure again quite this soon. I take it there are politics at play?”

“In terms of Narcissa Malfoy? Certainly, and I’ve no idea what beyond suspicions. If she plans a betrayal, however...”

“Three wands are better than two, and one of us will need to get Draco the fuck out of there,” Nizar finishes, frowning.

“Draco has made declarations?” Severus asks, intrigued.

“He’s stated that he doesn’t wish to die for a hypocrite. That’s all the declaration someone in Draco’s position can afford, and I’d rather take his word on it than leave him with people who’d force him to do otherwise.”

Salazar discovers Kanza lounging in front of the fireplace, and hisses at her until she crawls up into his hands. “There’s my darling girl,” he says in English, stroking Kanza’s head with his thumbnail. “I’m so glad my brother is much more stubborn than I, and that your mother was such a sneaky reptile.”

“Çinara was, yes,” Nizar agrees, reaching out for the basilisk. Kanza gives Salazar one last flick of her tongue before she climbs Nizar’s sleeve to settle around his neck. “She’s still so very proud of herself for Petrifying a Horcrux. Are we leaving?”

“If you’re ready.” Salazar holds out his arm. He waits until Severus and Nizar have both grabbed on before Apparating them directly to London. They arrive in the shade of a tree, completely unnoticed by the pedestrians and cars traveling around them.

“Bit of a Disillusionment Charm here,” Salazar explains, leading them away from the tree and towards a pub. Severus recognizes the neighborhood as being within the same borough as Grimmauld Place—fortunately, the Black family townhouse is several miles away.

“Edward Square.” Salazar points west with a southern cant. “King’s Cross is just over the canal, that way.”

The pub fortunately has a second door, one that leads into a steep, narrow stairwell. On the second floor are four doors to four different lettered flats; Salazar puts a key into the lock of the final door but doesn’t open it. Instead, he turns around and gives Nizar and Severus a copy of that same key. “Each of you, key in the lock. Literally key yourself into the wards, or there won’t be much left of you but an ash pile.”

“Pleasant,” Nizar says, but he sounds approving of lethal security measures. He also watches Severus insert the key before miming him. When that’s done, Salazar pushes open the door, revealing a small, comfortable parlor with a fireplace just large enough for two people to share without it being overcrowded. Next to that is a short hallway that has a very large, bright kitchen that should by rights take up the entire flat’s available square footage. A dining room built with seating for six is across from the kitchen, while further down the hall are four bedrooms, each with an en suite bath.

The rear of the flat has a sliding glass door that lets in sunlight. Opening it reveals a balcony attached to a cast-iron stairwell that goes down into the private, brick-walled garden Salazar mentioned that morning. “Herbs,” Severus notes, glancing at the even rows of flowers, herbs, and magical plants growing instead of a useless topiary display.

“I often have need, and this way I’m assured the neighbors don’t make off with them.” Salazar leans over the balcony railing. “There are also sound charms that let in noise, but don’t let it back out.”

“Convenient,” Nizar says in an innocent tone. Severus glares at him, but Nizar only smiles in response.

“Those keys have a fancy bit of magic to them, as well.” Salazar glances up at the overcast sky. “They’re now blood-bound to you, a living bit of blood recognition. If someone steals one and tries to use it, they won’t like the results much at all.”

“You’re hinting that even if one of us is in the flat, we should let the other unlock the door to enter,” Nizar says, brow furrowing. “That happened before, didn’t it? Someone opening the door to someone else.”

“It did, yes.” Salazar’s mouth turns down at the corners. “It’s so bloody difficult to hold a funeral for someone who’s already been declared dead by both sides—and that’s leaving out how difficult it was to put that man’s body into his own crypt, considering it already had an occupant.”

“Who?” Severus asks, curious.

Salazar shakes his head. “No, Severus. When this war is done, you’ll know. There is a list that will come into Nizar’s possession. I want those names recognized, but not until it’s safe. You!” Salazar points at his brother. “Go pick a bedroom you can stand looking at for the next fourteen days.” Nizar rolls his eyes and goes back into the flat.

“And we’re lingering out here because...?”

“Because the gift I have for Nizar for the Solstice, the one I’d planned to give him...what I learned last Tuesday might have burnt those plans to ash.” Salazar reaches into his trouser pocket and pulls out a tiny book that he enlarges to reveal a photo album. Severus feels his breath catch at the sight of the first photograph beyond the album’s cover: Lily, James, and tiny Harry Potter. “I don’t know if it should be his again so soon.”

“How did you get this?” Severus asks, flipping through several pages. All of the photos inside are from 1977 onward, and only feature James or Lily—or later, parents with their child.

Salazar takes back the album and closes it. “You asked me about July. That’s the only thing my brother asked me to safeguard. Not a book or a broom, a letter or a jewel. Only that, and nothing else.”

“Let me think on it,” Severus says, not knowing what else to suggest. “Perhaps after the lingering shadow of Christmas Dinner tomorrow.”

“Oh, I wrote back to Narcissa and sent the reply off by borrowed house-elf a moment ago,” Nizar says. Salazar tucks the shrunken album back into his pocket as Nizar steps back outside. “Added a plus-one to make up for Salazar’s attendance.”

Salazar frowns. “I didn’t say I would attend!”

“Too bad,” Nizar replies with a cheeky smile. “You can stop playing dead in grand fashion, and by grand I mean by scaring the absolute fuck out of a lot of blood-purist twats.”

Salazar’s expression brightens. “Then I should return here by what time tomorrow?”

“Four should do it,” Severus replies, amused. Nizar does indeed understand Slytherin motivation, no matter who the Slytherin in question happens to be.

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow evening,” Salazar declares, Disapparating from the balcony.

* * * *

“I unpacked in that bedroom there,” Nizar says, pointing at the bedroom closest to the outer wall and the balcony’s potential garden escape, if escape becomes necessary. “Unless you want a different room.”

Severus takes a moment to pin Nizar against the wall, watching with entranced bemusement as such a simple thing causes Nizar’s lips to part, his pupils to dilate in reaction. Then he kisses the man, sucking on Nizar’s lower lip and earning a low-pitched whimper. “If I wanted to sleep in a different bedroom, I would have remained at Hogwarts.”

“Right. Got it. I’ll be...something,” Nizar says vaguely, and almost walks straight into the doorframe that opens into the kitchen on his way down the hall.

Severus smiles and goes into the bedroom, unpacking what he brought into drawers that haven’t yet been claimed. Granted, one of the drawers is full of essays bound by four differing House colors. Severus still hasn’t decided what is worse—the constant homework he assigns and the need to grade it, or the possibility of having to grade all of it at once.

He lifts his head as he hears music. Not the alboka, which is a pile of ash, but the single pipe woodwind of a well-tuned and crafted recorder. He expects the melody to be a repeat of the two he's heard before, or something unfamiliar, and is badly startled when it's neither.

Severus goes back out to the hall, passes by the kitchen and dining room, and finds Nizar in the cramped parlor. His eyes are closed as he picks out the notes, his fingers moving along the rosewood in a way that makes it look simple. He is also, Severus realizes, not once pausing to draw in a breath. He didn't realize one could apply circular breathing to a recorder.

Nizar takes the recorder from his lips and glances up at him. "Oh, now what's that expression for?"

"Where did you hear that song?" Severus is surprised by the hoarse quality of his voice.

"This?" Nizar glances at the recorder, as if it holds the answer to Severus's question. "It's just a tune I've had in my head, off and on, for...gods. Literally centuries, Severus."

"Centuries." Severus glances around and spies not a gramophone set up in the corner, but a proper glass-covered, 1970s-era three-speed turntable on a corner stand. Inside the cabinet below are properly stored vinyl records. Given Salazar's t-shirt Friday, Severus isn't surprised to find Pink Floyd in the small collection. He pulls out the first album and slides the record out of the paper, glancing around as he does so. The turntable isn't plugged in, and he doesn't see speakers, so magic must be taking care of those concerns.

"What is all of that, and what are you doing?" Nizar asks.

"What you're playing from centuries ago was released in 1975, Nizar."

"Seriously?" Nizar sounds baffled. "You don't think it's a coincidence?"

"Not for this." Severus doesn't even need to guess where to place the needle. Those are memories that are clear in his head, if only because what came after is so distorted by hatred and misery. "This is a non-magical band. Pink Floyd. Your brother seems to be a fan."

"That was printed on his shirt yesterday," Nizar murmurs, and tilts his head to listen when sound pours out of the very walls. He's fine until the third verse, whereupon he captures Severus's hand in a death grip:

*"How I wish, how I wish you were here.
We're just two lost souls
Swimming in a fish bowl,
Year after year,
Running over the same old ground.
What have we found?
The same old fears.
Wish you were here."*

"That's not right," Nizar whispers. "It should be—female. The singer. I know those words, but it was a woman—"

“Nizar.” Severus interrupts what sounds like minor panic. “Nizar, it’s all right. I suspected it might be.”

Nizar gives him a bewildered look. “How?”

“Well—actually, Lily *hated* that song. She always said she didn’t understand why I liked it.” Severus lifts the needle from the record when the last guitar notes fade. “Maybe the war changed her mind.”

Nizar watches him put the album away. “Salazar’s grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles—they were all dead by 990. I don’t have any memory of calling anyone by those titles, those names. I...I’m glad. I’m glad I remember something of her.”

I’m just glad you no longer remember hearing them die, Severus thinks, and buries the morbid thought before it can lurk in his eyes. “You carry a memory that left such a lasting impression that not even the Preservation Charm’s failure rid you of it.”

“No, it didn’t.” Nizar manages to smile. “Would you play that again later?”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you how the bloody thing works.” Severus glances down at Nizar’s shirt and vest. “You said you had a modern button-down shirt. Go put it on. We’re going out.”

“Are we?”

“Salazar asked me to properly introduce you to the twentieth century. I’m not about to disobey the Founder of my House,” Severus replies. “Go on. Change shirts. If Salazar lives here, I imagine there is a coat in one of these bedrooms you can wear over it.”

While waiting, Severus flips to the liner notes for the song. The last part of the second chorus has an entirely different meaning for him now, one he would have found laced with bitterness six months ago:

*And did you exchange
A walk on part in the war
For a lead role in a cage?*

“I did, once,” Severus murmurs. “But I’m going to escape this fucking cage.”

Bellum dux Magum

Chapter Summary

“Shall we keep score, little brother?”

“Of how many different people we insult, how many insults total, or how many people end up getting stabbed before the night is over?”

"I'm fine with all of the above."

Severus is accustomed to the fact that everything owned and operated by most English Londoners is closed on Christmas Eve, but a Japanese restaurant is still open for those who don't celebrate. The other option is Chinese, but Severus suspects that the food isn't a match for what Nizar might have experienced in ancient Imperial China.

“I have no idea what any of this is. Just...order for me,” Nizar says.

“Are you sure?”

Nizar grins at him. “Severus, unless it's still trying to escape me, I'll eat it. I'm not particular about a meal.”

“You're going to pay for that remark,” Severus promises, and orders nothing but uramaki, sashimi, temaki, nigiri, and maki, all of it paired with differing types of raw fish.

“This is raw?” Nizar selects one of the nigiri pieces and dips it in sauce. “Fuck, I have been eating fish wrong for my entire existence,” he says, and Severus can't help laughing.

“Cinema.” Nizar gives the building a doubtful look. There is a crowd despite the holiday, which annoys Severus, but if one wishes to avoid crowds, one leaves London entirely. “I don't really know what that is beyond what I've heard.”

“You'll either love it or hate it, and I don't mean the experience, total—I mean it varies from film to film.”

Severus tried his best to choose something completely harmless and fucking meaningless. Instead, *A Midwinter's Tale* is a film about a group of incompetents trying to put on bloody Shakespeare. Worse, it's “Hamlet.”

Nizar spends most of his time pressed back against his seat, though he lets out a muted snicker every time there is a Shakespeare reference that is less than innocent. “Okay. That was...different.”

“Are you all right?” Severus asks when they're back on the street.

“It was really loud, really big, and there were so. Many. Fucking. Colors.” Nizar rubs his eyes. “The story was worth it, but my head bloody hurts. I should have asked Salazar if there were things I should possibly *not* stare at while in London.”

“I apologize,” Severus tries to say, but Nizar waves it off as unnecessary. “I think you’ve mentioned it before, but Salazar also has tetrachromacy?”

Nizar nods. “Salazar’s vision came from his mother and his father’s mother, so he had it from both sides of the family. I don’t know if mine was just a random manifestation from the bloodline, or if...if my parents had it.”

“If your father did, it was most certainly not something we discussed.” Severus frowns. “I wonder how you came to recover so much of your eyesight.”

“It wasn’t just Sana Visio. There was...” Nizar presses his lips together, fighting for memory. “I think today it would have been called nerve damage. I remember telling Helga that I was struck by something, but I can’t recall what or when. She repaired that damage.”

“The Dursleys, I would imagine,” Severus says in a flat voice.

“Maybe, but I don’t recall.” Nizar glances at him. “Has Vernon Dursley *always* been the size of a cave troll?” he asks. Severus tries to laugh, chokes on his own spit, and spends the next several minutes attempting to laugh, cough, and breathe at the same time.

Nizar has a wide grin on his face. “Was that a yes or a no?”

“When I met him, it was...” Severus has to think on it for a moment to make certain he has the timeframe correct. “The summer before the 1975 school term. He and Petunia had just started dating. Vernon Dursley was not the size of a cave troll at the time, but a cave troll certainly had the better personality. Lily and I did our best to avoid them, but there was one family dinner that unfortunately taught your grandparents that having all four of us at their table at the same time was a terrible idea. Vernon and Petunia were rude, especially to Lily. Once hostilities began, I had no compunctions about being vile in response, even if I’d listened to a certain portrait enough to also be polite about it. They both turned their attention to me and spent the rest of the meal mocking everything about my existence. I was angry, but I didn’t want Petunia to do that to her sister. Again.”

“And yet, you argue with me when I tell you that you have a kind soul,” Nizar says.

Severus scowls at him. “I’ve a reputation to maintain, thank you.”

“Of course,” Nizar says in a tone of neutral agreement that isn’t agreement at all. “Can I ask...what were their names?”

Severus has to give himself a moment, old guilt and grief stealing his voice. “Malcolm and Jane. They were—they were both very kind, though I went to a great deal of trouble to keep them from discovering exactly how bad my living situation was at home. I worried they would attempt to do something about it, and my father had drinking companions with violent tendencies.

“They also had their daughters late in life, close to the point when it was dangerous for a woman to bear a child in the wizarding or the Muggle world. By the time Lily and Petunia were teenagers, Jane and Malcolm were in their late fifties. Malcolm’s health was affected by his career, and I knew even then that he would not live to be an old man. I think the stress of knowing Lily and her fiancé were fighting in a war...Malcolm died early in 1979, and I imagine Jane refused to live without him, as she died later that same year. I only know because I visited their graves in Cokeworth.”

“Would you be willing to show them to me?”

Severus nods. “I don’t mind. I imagine you’ve never been to Godric’s Hollow, either.”

“Not in this century, no.” Nizar takes Severus’s hand, ignoring a few of the side-eyed looks of surprise or displeasure the action draws from passers-by. “I’m not certain how I feel about either, to be honest.”

When they go back to the flat, Nizar retrieves a bundle of scrolls and declares that since his head already hurts, he might as well compound the suffering with grading. Severus calls him a masochist and goes outside, descending the circular staircase to the flat’s private garden. The air smells pleasantly of a multitude of herbs, which do an excellent job of nearly overpowering the scent of London, and of the Regent’s Canal.

Severus finds a wrought-iron bench near the brick wall and sits down. When he blows out a breath, it emerges as white mist. He watches it rise up into the sky before it dissipates. The moon, a bare sliver of a waxing crescent, set hours ago. The sky is clear, but there is too much light pollution to see much of the stars.

A sense of something utterly foreign is trying to intrude upon his thoughts. It takes Severus a ridiculous length of time to puzzle out what.

Happy. Is he?

Severus thinks on it, but he isn’t certain. If not happy, then he is at least far more content than he was months ago. He’s still too bewildered by how quickly things have changed this week to believe happiness is yet a possibility, but contentment? Perhaps.

The parlor is empty when he checks, so Severus goes to the bedroom they claimed. Nizar is curled up in bed, wearing the loose white silk shirt and trousers he uses for pyjamas. Severus still wants to see all of this mysterious outfit; Nizar counters that unless Severus can find someone who knows how to put it on correctly, it would just be a disaster and thus serve no point at all.

Nizar lifts his head when Severus shuts the door. He must have given up on the essays, as he’s tucking one of the twins’ Self-inking quills between the pages of the book his students gave him to set it aside on the nightstand. “Did you finally decide it was too cold to sit out there on a bloody metal bench?”

“I wanted to think,” Severus replies, shedding his jacket and hanging it in the wardrobe. “Do you have any idea how much effort it’s taking not to make Narnia jokes right now?”

Nizar gives him a wry look. “I might have some thoughts about that, yes. At least it is not a Vanishing Cabinet.”

Severus goes into the bathroom to clean up and change for the night. “Black silk to white silk,” he says, amused by the monochromatic theme of pyjamas.

“Yes, but you always look like fucking royalty in black silk, so I am not going to be complaining,” Nizar says.

Severus frowns. “I do not.”

Nizar lifts an eyebrow. “Severus: you are tall, you move like flowing water, and clothes fit you like they’re grateful for the privilege. Yes, you do.”

“Then you do, as well,” Severus argues.

Nizar shakes his head. “No. I move like I understand what I’m wearing, yes, but mostly it’s the fact that I walk through a room in a way that Salazar always claims advertises that I will happily kill anyone present and smile about it, so it’s best not to tempt me. That is very much not the same thing.”

“Maybe not, but that was a strangely erotic thought.”

Nizar laughs as Severus climbs into bed. “I’ll keep that in mind, but please not tonight. The only reason I’m still awake is that I was waiting for you.”

Severus blows out the candles that were lit on the side table. “You didn’t have to.”

“Yes, I did. Strange place, strange room, strange magic, and strange scents in the air. I’d panic without your presence,” Nizar tells him. It isn’t self-deprecation, just dry fact.

Severus lays down and pulls Nizar into his arms. “Then next time I will not linger on a cold bench for so long.” He presses his nose into Nizar’s hair, which is still damp from a recent wash, and catches a soothing whiff of sandalwood.

Nizar releases a sigh. “But something is still on your mind.”

“I was doing my best to think about nothing at all, actually. But yes, when I do consider it—Nizar, I had to watch everything happen on Friday morning in the Ministry, knowing that I might lose you and there would be nothing I could do to prevent it.”

“No,” Nizar refutes at once. “You are not losing me, not to him. Absolutely not. Never.” The words have the strength of centuries behind them—no mere promise, but a vow.

* * * *

Severus is the one to Side-Along Apparate Nizar and Salazar to Wiltshire, as he is the only one who is supposed to know where to go. He thinks it likely that Salazar is aware of the Manor's location, but would prefer not to advertise such.

His hand on the gate signals the wards, which recognize him and allow Severus to push the gate open so they can enter. There is an inhuman shriek to his left, which makes him scowl.

"Oh, what lovely peacocks," Nizar says in a tone that reveals he finds them to be the complete opposite. The noisy birds make the walk up the gravel drive seem far too long.

"I'd wager they're delicious," Salazar adds. An albino peacock that had been on the approach wisely decides to veer off in a different direction.

"Not just a private affair," Severus notes, seeing the shadows of multiple beings pass by the windows on the first floor.

"I did think it would be politics," Nizar studies the great wooden double doors as Severus reaches out to pull the chime. "We should have found someone else to round this out to a quartet, just to be irritating."

"You say that as if I'm not irritating enough for us all, little brother," Salazar says.

The Malfoy's aging house-elf, Bificiss, opens the door and gestures for them to enter. The elf is wearing a spotless new black tea towel edged in green silk—an acknowledgement of the Malfoy family standard, but with the Black family green instead of the Malfoy's silver. Interesting.

"You've the proper invitations, yes?" Bificiss asks when he notices Severus's companions.

Severus hands over his invitation, with its crossed-out plus-one, to indicate he came on his own. Then Nizar hands over his, with his plus-one invitation circled twice in green ink. Bificiss raises his ears as he glances at both, but otherwise doesn't comment. "This way, sirs. Unless any of you would prefer to be addressed by another gender?"

That is definitely Narcissa's deft hand at manners. Lucius never remembers that the wizarding world is supposed to recognize more than male or female. "I'm fine as is, thank you," Severus tells the elf, a statement echoed by Salazar and Nizar.

"Very good, sirs," Bificiss responds, as another elf Apparates into the foyer to take their cloaks. "When Bificiss be bringing sirs to the hall, please wait to be announced before you enter."

"Ballroom," Severus explains as they follow the elf. "I imagine people have spread out from that central, open room of the home, but the ballroom is where guests are announced."

"Shall we keep score, little brother?" he hears Salazar ask.

"Of how many different people we insult, how many insults total, or how many people end up getting stabbed before the night is over?"

Salazar chuckles. "I'm fine with all of the above. Who to take which?"

"If anyone stabs anybody, it will probably be me," Nizar says dryly. "I'll give you the sheer number of different people insulted, but Severus will take the house on total insults."

Severus has to clench his jaw against a smile. Impassive. His goal is always, as ever, to be completely inscrutable. "Is this how the two of you spent your time in Court?"

"Of course it is," Salazar replies. "How else do you alleviate that sort of boredom?"

"Bificiss will be announcing sirs in order of rank—"

"Not today," Nizar interrupts the house-elf. "Reverse order, please."

Bificiss looks insulted. "That is not being the proper way to do this!"

"Today it is," Nizar soothes the elf. "Given what I've heard from certain parties, bear in mind that you're obeying the instruction of a noble of superior rank rather than Madam Malfoy, so you are *forbidden* to hurt yourself for doing as I ask. Understood?"

"Well—er—yes, sirs. Bificiss understands, sirs," Bificiss says, confounded. Then he shakes his head hard enough to make his ears flap before stomping his foot. House-elf magic creates a noise like a staff being hammered onto the marble floor. "The Malfoy Household be welcoming Professor Severus Prince Snape, teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Holder of a magical mastery in Mind Magic, Holder of Hogwarts' Western Seat of Magic as Head to the House of Slytherin, and Most Esteemed Potions Master of Great Britain!"

Severus steps forward, ignoring curious, baleful, or disinterested stares. It's the first time he's ever heard the elves mention anything of his knowledge of Occlumency or Legilimency, and not necessarily something he wanted known. He has to admit that his entrance seems more dramatic with the mention of his being a Holder of Hogwarts' magic. Nizar didn't mention Severus would also gain a title with that privilege

Narcissa, as always, manages to appear out of the throng at the perfect moment. "Severus!" She holds out her hand. "I'm so glad you could join us. I was worried that other matters would see you arriving late."

"Not today, Madam Malfoy." He takes her hand, planting the courtier's false kiss, and straightens. "You provided me an escape from Hogwarts' very own Christmas Dinner. I wouldn't have missed this at all."

"Of course." Narcissa's mouth turns up at the corner. "And did you bring me a guest, Severus?"

Severus smiles at her. "I brought you *two*," he says just as Bificiss's voice rings out again. He turns around to take note of Nizar standing in the doorway. The smile on his face and the shine in his eyes is all sharp edges.

“The Malfoy Household be welcoming Professor Nizar Hariwalt Slytherin, the Lord of León, *Casa de Deslizarse de Castilla y Moravia*, teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Preeminent Master in the Arts of Magical Defence; holder of magical masteries in Mind Magic, *Picti Magia*, Blood Sorcery, and Metamorphmagi. Protector of Hogewáp; *Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis*.”

Severus sees Nizar’s eyes twitch in response to that last part, but he strides forward as if nothing is wrong. “Narcissa,” he greets the woman who is still staring at him.

“Lord Slytherin.” Narcissa snaps her mouth shut and recovers herself with a Black lady’s aplomb. She holds out her hand, which he takes and smiles over. “I’m so grateful you accepted my invitation.”

“After our most recent encounter, I would be foolish to ignore it,” Nizar replies, and drops an actual kiss onto her fingertips. “Courtesy should be met with courtesy, should it not?”

Narcissa blinks exactly once before her smile returns. “I most certainly agree. Who is accompanying you, if Severus accepted my invitation on his own?”

Bificiss sounds like he’s developed a choking difficulty before he clears his voice and stomps the floor again. “Salazar Fernan Slytherin, Emerald Flame of the West, *Casa de Deslizarse de Gipuzkoa. Mágico Alférez* to King Ramiro II of León, *Marqués* of Castile and León in the reign of Juan Carlos I of Spain. Preeminent Potions Master of Spain and Great Britain; Distinguished Master of Magical Sight and Divination; holder of magical masteries in Astrology, Mind Magic, Earth-Speaking, Rune Magic, and Herbology. Hogewáp Founder and Keeper of Hogwarts’ Western Magic.”

“My brother,” Nizar answers Narcissa, but only after every single sound in the room dies. “I hope you don’t mind, Madam Malfoy.”

“Mind?” Narcissa is wide-eyed. “No—no! No, of course I do not mind, Lord Slytherin. Marquess! You are most welcome in my home.” She strides forward as if she hasn’t just been scared out of her wits.

“I am going to kill him,” Nizar whispers.

“Salazar before anyone else?” Severus murmurs under his breath.

“Do you fucking know what *Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis* means?” Nizar gives Severus a look of complete horror before he schools his features back to normal and trails after Narcissa, who his *blushing* as Salazar takes her hand.

Severus is surrounded the moment Nizar leaves his side, and has to cope with the parents of Goyle, Bole, Pucey, Montague, and Davis. “That cannot possibly be Salazar Slytherin,” Amora Goyle hisses in shock.

“He looks nothing like his portrait,” Constantine Pucey agrees.

Severus gives them all a disdainful look. “Oh, so we can have one Slytherin returned to us by exceptionally advanced Preservation magic in a portrait frame, but the other cannot possibly exist? Don’t be such utter fools.”

“The brother is one thing,” Marcus Peebles retorts. “Salazar Slytherin is another matter entirely!”

Severus meets Blanchette Carrow’s eyes. Alecto and Amycus’s sister is the only adult of that particular family whom Severus knows does not bear the Dark Mark. “Is he, Marcus?”

“I believe it,” Urith Avery says. “After the events of this past Friday morning, I wouldn’t be surprised if all four of Hogwarts’ Founders appeared on British soil.”

“Sacrilege,” Hillaria Bole mutters. “We only concern ourselves with Slytherins.”

Clare Mulciber lifts one perfect eyebrow. “Salazar Slytherin is the Founder of our House. The Professor Slytherin is lesser, no matter the familial relation.”

“Lesser?” Marguerite Davis gives Mulciber’s sister a scornful look. “Did you not study your Latin properly, darling?”

Dolohov’s wife, Margot, fans her face with perfected carelessness. “*I* did not neglect those lessons. How very, very intriguing.”

Severus walks away from them in relief when Narcissa gestures imperiously for his company. “Darling, so good of you to join us,” she is saying to Draco. For his part, Draco is staring at Salazar as if someone invited a rabid dragon to the occasion. “Marquess, my son, Draco. Draco, I’m certain you’re aware of this man’s identity.”

“Yes, Mother,” Draco squeaks, but his bow is perfection. “Welcome to our home, Marquess.”

“It was most kind of your mother to invite me, young Mister Malfoy,” Salazar replies.

Draco’s lips do not turn down; he frowns with his eyes. “Forgive me for my rudeness, but with my father absent, I must unfortunately insist that it is young *Lord* Malfoy.”

“Lord?” Salazar looks at Narcissa, affecting what appears to be genuine confusion. “The Wiltshire Malfoys are still recognized by the British Crown, despite the International Statute of Secrecy?”

Narcissa presses her lips together, but Severus can’t decipher the expression on her face. “No, Marquess. They are not.”

“Then...I do apologize, young Master Draco, but your household has no Lordship attached. All such titles must be recognized by the British crown, even if the British Crown does not reveal the existence of said titles,” Salazar says.

“They—those titles must be recognized by the Crown?” Draco asks, shocked.

“It’s part of the Statute, Draco,” Nizar explains. “Any country who agreed to the Statute of Secrecy that still has titled nobility and a monarchy—their magicians gave up the rights to their titles unless they arranged otherwise directly with the sitting monarch.”

“But—then—how do you still have a title, sir?” Draco asks Salazar.

“My country kindly told the International Statute of Secrecy to bugger off,” Salazar answers. “So too did Norway and Denmark. Greece did as well before they abolished their monarchy. I believe Sweden, Jordan, Morocco, Tonga, and Swaziland also refuse to acknowledge the Statute. Oh, yes, Cambodia doesn’t either, though they had to disdain the Secrecy Act a second time after their monarchy was restored following the Khmer Rouge regime.”

“I’d no idea the list was so long,” Narcissa says.

“Well, for obvious reasons, none of them like to advertise. Britain has a reputation, Madam Malfoy.” Salazar smiles. “There are others, of course. Oh, and I’m forgetting that there are also certain kingdoms in the Americas who ignore the Statute, but it is hard for them to receive recognition when the countries they dwell within refuse to admit those kingdoms exist at all.”

Narcissa frowns. “That sounds like quite the trying existence. Oh—my apologies, Marquess. I am monopolizing you. I’m certain you and your brother would like to meet the guests who’ve gathered in the Manor this evening.”

“I have been greatly looking forward to it.” Salazar inclines his head at her, smiling again, and wanders off to go completely terrify a bunch of Marked Death Eaters, unMarked supporters, and a few others who Severus suspects have been holding themselves aloof from the war, waiting to see how the situation develops.

“And I suspect you, Professor, are quite aware of the identity of all of them,” Narcissa says to Nizar.

“Oh, I am.” Nizar gives the crowd an intrigued look. “However, most of them are not familiar with *me*. Do you think I should rectify that lack?”

“By all means.” Narcissa watches Nizar walk straight for the Rowle clan before she glares at Severus. “You could have warned me.”

“Dearest Narcissa: where is the fun in that?” Severus asks.

Narcissa presses her lips together again, this time to hide a smirk. “Did I not say that your manners would suit you in a Court? I stand by those words, Severus.”

“Between you and Nizar, I learned them quite well.” Severus allows his lips to curl up when she gives him a startled look. “Why do you think your own teachings were so successful, Narcissa?”

“They had a solid groundwork. I see.” Narcissa tilts her head as she rests her hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Darling, please do not be rude. There are many here who *do* need to see you,

especially given your father's absence."

"Of course, Mother." Draco nods and makes his beeline towards Salazar and the tiny gathering of the Mulciber clan seem nonchalant.

"Who is here, Narcissa?" Severus asks once Draco is out of earshot.

"Cornelius Yaxley, and yes, Corban's father is..." She narrows her eyes. "I'd like to say he is grieving, but he was always so worthless. He's angry, and it's quite pathetic to witness. Augustine Travers, now—he is grieving, and drinking to his recent loss. The Warringtons are present, as is the entirety of the Rowle family; you've seen Urith, Margot, Clare, and Marcus already, as well as Madams and Masters Davis, Bole, Pucey, Goyle, and Montague. Amycus and Aleto are here, though Blanchette is avoiding them—I cannot imagine why. The Parkinsons and Selwyns are mingling somewhere; Ratier and Cecily Gibbon attend, of course. Walden's uncle Phillip and his wife Nicola, as well as Patrick and Ingrid Rosier, are also in the Manor this evening."

"That is an intriguing list, Narcissa."

"Isn't it? More than a few of them only sent me word Friday evening that they planned to attend. I do believe previous to that unfortunate incident in the Ministry, they'd all had other things to do for the afternoon. And of course, the Minister for Magic was due to arrive until such unpleasantness occurred, whereupon he immediately sent his apologies." She shakes her head. "I do believe he's forgotten who will be controlling the Malfoy pocketbook with Lucius in Azkaban."

"You're assuming the Minister understands anything of politics at all."

"Mm." Narcissa presses in close to Severus's arm and lowers her voice. "My Spanish might be lacking in favor of French, but my Latin is flawless. Are you aware of what *Bellum dux Magum* means, Severus?"

"War mage, I believe."

"Yes. Do you know how many titled war mages dwell in Britain, dear?" Narcissa asks him.

Severus frowns. "Those are not exactly the sorts of social circles I'm accustomed to, Narcissa, even given your exceptional company."

"That is because *no one* moves in those circles, Severus." There is fearful regard in her eyes when she glances up at him. "Until this evening, it's long been believed that there were none. Instead, we have one. We have exactly *one* titled war mage, Severus, and he is standing in my ballroom!"

Severus escapes the ballroom when Narcissa moves on to other guests, tracking down Augustine Travers by the sheer amount of alcohol starting to emit from the man's skin. He makes the appropriate noises of sympathy and commiseration over Augustine's loss while letting a very inebriated Death Eater babble about whatever crosses his mind. Most of it is useless recollection regarding Justin Travers, but some of it might prove valuable at a later

date. Then Cornelius joins them to drink while still raging over Narcissa's daring to invite his son's murderer into this house on their Savior's sacred day of birth.

"Your son, with plenty of warning given by our Lord's enemy, looked at a *basilisk*," Severus says to the man, trying not to roll his eyes. "I do also recall hearing Nizar Slytherin warn Augustine's son not to dare his blade, and Justin was fool enough not to listen."

"Always did take after his grandfather a bit too much," Augustine says with a great, red-nosed sniff of renewed weeping. "Daft sod. Least I've still got a daughter in Beauxbatons, else my line would be ended!"

He leaves Cornelius and Augustine's company when it becomes clear that they won't be useful for anything else that evening. The elves bring Severus sparkling cider when he asks. He never drinks at these events unless it cannot be avoided. Narcissa keeps to the same habit, so she indulges him.

"War mage."

Severus turns around to see that he's been joined by Florentia Selwyn, Hector's only daughter. "That does seem to be what was announced, yes."

"What do you think, Professor?" Florentia gives him a look over her champagne glass that betrays nothing of her own thoughts. Severus is tempted to look behind her eyes to see what lies behind that incongruous expression and decides not to. Florentia was always a polite, well-behaved student.

"The house-elves use magic to discern and proclaim names and titles of those entering the Manor. Therefore, it must be true," Severus answers.

Florentia smiles. "That isn't the question I asked, but I will be fair and be more specific, sir. What do you think a war mage means for *us*?"

"I think..." Severus says carefully, "that Nizar Slytherin's presence puts a great number of people in a very precarious position."

"And what position does he place you in?" Florentia asks.

Severus raises both eyebrows. "Pardon me?"

She smirks into her glass. "Never mind. That was *that* question answered quite nicely. Oh, don't worry, Professor," she continues, when Severus does nothing but stare at her in glaring disapproval. "My father might not choose to recall, but *I* have not forgotten that the Dark Lord's first war is the reason I grew up without a mother. Have a good holiday, sir."

"And you as well, Florentia," Severus replies, feeling unsettled. He believes her words, but this house has many sets of ears wandering about, most of whom will eventually prove unfriendly.

Severus returns to the ballroom just in time to witness an altercation. Perhaps he should have taken Nizar and Salazar's wager-speaking more seriously.

“Excuse me?” Nizar is in the middle of saying, his voice bright and far too cheerful. “Did you just insult the current Head of my brother’s House?”

“What does it matter?” Ratier Gibbon is asking, a snide look on his face. “If that’s truly your brother returned, then he’s the more important man.”

“Oh, this should be entertaining,” Salazar says in a low mutter. Severus has no idea where the man even came from in the ballroom; he simply appeared at Severus’s side.

Nizar smiles at Ratier. “Salazar is the Head of my family’s House, yes, but he is not currently an instructor for Hogwarts, and he is not Slytherin’s Head of House. Therefore, it *does* matter. Apologize.”

Ratier’s smile is mocking. “And if I do not? It will be a duel?”

Severus can’t quite suppress an amused snort. If Ratier had answered the call and witnessed the Ministry confrontation, he would not be so daring, or so fucking stupid.

“Absolutely. What sort of duel would you like?” Nizar asks pleasantly.

Ratier, Cecily Gibbon, the Goyles, and Walden Macnair’s wife Walburga cackle like hyenas, as if Nizar said something ridiculous. “As if there is more than one—wands, you complete imbecile!” Ratier laughs.

Nizar raises his hand, the motion somehow lazy for all that it is also swift. An eyeblink later, Ratier has a dagger protruding from his chest, just above his heart. “I do not waste my wand on idiots,” Nizar says in withering dismissal as Ratier topples to the ground, eyes wide with surprise.

“You’ll—fucking pay for that!” Ratier gasps, wrapping his hand around the dagger’s hilt. It isn’t Helga’s blade, but the one Nizar owned before he discovered the Founder’s gifts.

“I really wouldn’t do that, were I you,” Nizar replies, squatting down next to Ratier. “You see, that blade is resting *riiiight* next to an artery emerging from your heart. If you pull that dagger out at that angle, you’ll sever the artery clean through. It doesn’t take very long at all to bleed out from that kind of injury—whereas, if you apologize, I’ll take care of it for you, and you’ll get to go home with your family today.”

“Fucking bastard!” Ratier spits.

Nizar is unimpressed. “So much less inclined to help you now. Come on. You can do it, Ratier. I want to hear you apologize, and you’d best pray to your God that I believe you to mean it.”

“Should we intervene?” Severus asks.

Salazar gives him an amused look. “Why?”

“Oh. No reason.” Severus glances over to find Narcissa and Draco standing together. Narcissa looks bored, but she never did care for Ratier’s company. Her son is pale, but is

watching the proceedings without saying a word.

Salazar has his wand out before Severus recognizes the necessity. "I would not," he warns Cecily and Clement Goyle, who freeze in the middle of pulling wands from their sleeves. "It's not polite to interfere in a duel."

"That's not a real duel!" Amora bleats.

"It's as real, and as deadly, as any duel ever witnessed," Salazar counters, smiling at them. "Do behave yourselves. My brother could have let that idiot kill himself, but he's being nice. Don't tempt Nizar into being otherwise."

"I wonder what happened to the last person who tempted the *Britanni Bellum dux Magum* into not being nice," Blanchette says in a mild voice.

"Do you really want to know?" Nizar peers down at Ratier, who has broken out in a sweat. "I don't mind sharing. I mean, you're sharing your opinions so freely, the least I can do is share something of myself."

Ratier's eyes flicker down to the dagger still sticking out of his chest. "What happened...the last time you weren't nice?"

"Well." When Nizar smiles, Salazar sucks in a breath and utters a curse under his breath. "In the year 1012, a magician who called himself Drugo started dabbling in blood magic, and the terrible things it could be used to do to people. He was defeated in battle by my son, Brice. My son died of his wounds, but this Drugo...he was still alive when I found him."

Nizar leans down close to Ratier. "Helga held him down for me while I carved out the bastard's heart and performed the magic that ensured he would not die, but he would also *not live*." Ratier lets out an undignified yelp. "Then I buried him alive, cursed to live out the lifespan of every single being he'd murdered before that half-life would end."

"Now: don't you feel so entirely fortunate, Ratier Gibbon?" Nizar asks.

"How many lifetimes?" Frances Bole whispers.

"Drugo killed my son when he was twenty-two, and also seventy-four others, most of them young men, women, and children." Nizar glances upwards, as if considering it. "If his tomb hasn't collapsed, I would imagine there is a distinct possibility that Drugo is still screaming."

"I am so very sorry for the offence I have caused you by insulting the Head of your brother's House of Slytherin," Ratier rasps, and then he swallows. "Severus Snape, you have my most sincere apology for the castigation I cast upon your profession, your status in our Lord Voldemort's circle, and your capabilities as a wizard."

"Ah. That explains why Nizar went directly for the throat," Salazar murmurs. "Three insults instead of one. That poor bastard is fortunate to be alive."

"Indeed," Severus replies, not knowing what else to say. Instead, he merely watches as Nizar carefully draws the dagger out of Ratier in a way that doesn't endanger his arteries. Then he

uses his wand to heal the wound so that no trace of damage to skin or cloth remains.

When Nizar stands up, he holds out his hand to Ratier. “There. Isn’t that much better?”

Ratier looks at Nizar’s hand as if it’s a venomous serpent—which is not so far from the truth at all. Then he takes Nizar’s hand and lets Nizar pull him to his feet with one easy motion. “That is...thank you for your mercy, my Lord.”

“I do hope you continue to deserve it,” Nizar replies, smiling again. “Narcissa, you have my most sincere apologies for shedding blood in your beautiful home.”

Narcissa curtsies in place, something Severus has only ever seen her grant the Dark Lord. “My Lord Nizar is most gracious, and in the end, shed no blood at all. No apologies are needed.”

“I was there on Friday. At the Ministry.” Severus sighs and rolls his eyes when Augustine toddles out of the crowd, red-faced and possibly on the verge of alcohol poisoning. “What you did to the Lord Voldemort—what do you call that?”

Nizar steals Ratier’s handkerchief to clean his dagger, which makes Ratier skip back a step before he realizes that he isn’t being stabbed again. “When I first met Tom Riddle in 1938, he insulted me. Afterwards, he became responsible for the deaths of many, many Slytherins of my House that I happened to like.”

Nizar puts his dagger back in his sleeve, where Severus didn’t even know he’d placed it to begin with. “If Drugo is not the best example I can give in how much I believe in making someone *suffer* for the wrongs they’ve done, then there is no hope for any of you.”

“Then you stand against the Dark Lord!” Oliver Montague declares.

Nizar gives the man a look of exasperated disbelief. “Really? That’s news to you? Voldemort tried to entrap me and then steal my magic. I took it back, stole part of his magic instead, and then stabbed him in the face. Did you truly think that would somehow make myself and Voldemort to be allies?”

Gamelin Rowle lets out a snort of laughter and then quickly composes himself before his family notices. Severus glances around: Florentia looks grim and pleased; Walden Macnair’s aunt and uncle are both failing to hide their smiles; Marguerite Davis is rubbing at her left forearm with a thoughtful look on her face; Blanchette Carrow is grinning in a way that reveals almost all of her teeth; Urith Avery, John Avery’s sister, is quietly distancing herself from the Boles and the Carrows.

“Narcissa, I demand that you get this pair of...of *traitors* to the way of Slytherin out of this house!” Alecto cries.

Narcissa gives the woman a scornful glare. “This is my home, Alecto Carrow, and you have no power within it. I invited them; the Marquess and the Lord Nizar are my guests in a manner that has nothing to do with alliances and everything to do with good manners. It is other guests who have acted against the rules of hospitality that I require all of my guests

adhere to. If anyone is going to leave first, it will be you, Alecto, for daring to be so presumptuous!”

“There is no need, Madam Malfoy.” Salazar walks over to Narcissa and bows over her hand. “Tempers have been stirred too viciously, and I would hate for my brother and myself to spoil the rest of your holiday evening. We’ll depart, and we’ll not forget the hospitality that has been offered.”

“The Marquess Salazar is far too kind,” Narcissa murmurs in response. “I do apologize for any unpleasantness.”

“Not at all. I had a fine time,” Salazar replies.

Nizar goes to Narcissa and smiles at her. “I don’t get to stab people every day.”

“No, just every other day,” Narcissa says dryly. “Thank you for not murdering someone within my home.”

“You’re very welcome.” Nizar kisses both of her cheeks, which Narcissa handles with cool grace, and then follows Salazar from the ballroom.

Severus would dearly like to join them, but he is marked as attending on his own. That leaves him to steer the new political waters, most of it filled with fools who may have quite literally pissed themselves in terror.

“We should...we should inform the Dark Lord of what has occurred this evening,” Cecily ventures at last.

“Indeed we should,” Hillaria says firmly. “I still have my doubts as to Salazar Slytherin’s true identity, but Nizar Slytherin has made it beyond clear that he does not stand with our Lord.”

“Severus must go, then,” Beatrix Montague declares in her harsh voice. “With Lucius and Bellatrix both imprisoned, Severus is the one our Lord most highly respects.”

“And is also held in high esteem by Nizar Slytherin,” Dominic Bole muses. “That could prove quite useful for the Dark Lord’s favorite spy.”

“It very much could,” Severus agrees in a bland voice. “But that will be for the Dark Lord to decide, Dominic, as you well know.” He smiles in satisfaction when Dominic cringes back. “Narcissa, I must beg your pardon, but they’re correct. Might I use your Floo in order to proceed to Little Hangleton?”

Narcissa gives him a brief, sharp look tinged with worry before she nods. “But of course, Severus. It is in the parlor, and as ever, at your disposal. I am only sorry that you must depart so soon.”

“I will return for the remainder of the evening if it is possible,” Severus promises her. The house-elves bring him his cloak, which he puts on before tossing powder into the Floo.

It takes Severus far too long to realize that Margot Dolohov was no longer in the ballroom when he departed.

We Are Who We Become

Chapter Summary

“Arthwys would have liked you. He spent his rule trying to make up for the wrongs of his childhood, and would hold with no oppression of the weak.”

"And you hate him."

“Well. That was fun,” Nizar says, slumping down in an armchair in the parlor of the London flat.

“It was. Not quite what I expected of the evening, but still almost as entertaining as our old days in Court.” Salazar sits down on an ottoman across from Nizar. “He is, you know.”

“Who is what?”

“Drugo,” Salazar clarifies. “He’s still screaming. The whole of that region outside Edinburgh thinks that hillside is haunted.”

Nizar scowls. “Good, because I’m still not sorry.”

“I didn’t expect you to be, and I still blame you not at all.” Salazar reaches out and clasps Nizar’s hand. “Too few do not realize that the modern traits of the House of Slytherin originate with you.”

“That is not my fault,” Nizar protests. “You share those traits, too.”

“Yes, but you’re the one who exemplifies them to some rather unforgiving extremes,” Salazar counters, grinning at him.

“Speaking of extremes: *Protector ex Hogewáp, Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis*, Salazar. What the *fuck*?” Nizar asks.

Salazar leans back, resting his hands on his knees. “Gods. You didn’t remember, did you?”

“No!” Nizar shouts, wide-eyed. “I remembered Myrddin’s title, but not—not fucking that, Salazar!”

Salazar hesitates. “Congratulations; you’re the last living, titled war mage of the British Isles?”

Nizar glares at him. “How the fuck did that happen, Sal?”

“Oh.” Salazar glances up at the ceiling and sighs. “That would have been Myrddin’s doing, little brother.”

“Was it before or after I punched the bastard?”

“After, actually,” Salazar replies, smiling. “You impressed him.”

“You mean I *left* an impression,” Nizar says, feeling himself smile in response.

Salazar shrugs. “That as well. I should go. It is truly getting late, and I’ve things to do before I sleep tonight. Will you be all right on your own?”

“I’ll merely be working while waiting for Severus to return. It’s not as if this hasn’t been a familiar state of affairs for a long time now,” Nizar says. “Go on. I’ll see you...soon, I suppose.”

“I’ll give the two of you a few days on your own again before I send word. Good night, Nizar.”

“Good night, Sal.” Nizar sees him to the door, then shuts and locks it so that it will only respond to the key that Severus carries. That done, he settles down with a quill and a stack of essays. Based on some of Severus’s rants, Nizar worried that he would be in for a frustrating time of grading, but many of them are entertaining, if not factually correct.

Sometime later, Nizar hears the key turn in the lock. He puts his work aside and stands up as Severus pushes open the door. He closes it again before turning around, dropping the key onto the table next to the door.

Nizar feels his shoulders rise up as his chin lowers. There is a terribly blank expression on Severus’s face that is mindful of *Tempero*, but not...not quite. “Severus?”

Severus’s dark eyes focus on him without effort. That would be reassuring but for the continued lack of expression on his face, the lack of personality in his eyes...and the flash of red that most certainly does not belong.

“Severus,” Nizar says again. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. Can you do that?”

After a dreadful, long moment in which his heart beats too fast, Severus gives him a jerking nod.

“Good.” Nizar swallows against a dry mouth and quotes, “*Why don’t they teach logic at these schools? There are only three possibilities. Either your sister is telling lies, or she is mad, or she is telling the truth.*”

“Nizar?” Severus shakes his head, a sharp movement from side to side, before his knees buckle. Nizar leaps forward and catches him before he can fall, but Severus is both taller and heavier than he is—they land on the floor, with Nizar taking the brunt of the fall.

“Shush.” Nizar arranges them so that Severus’s head is pillowed in his lap. “I want you to block your thoughts and defend your mind, Severus,” Nizar orders quietly.

Severus's eyes slip closed. At first, Nizar thinks he's succeeding, but then he can feel the increase in magical pressure on the Dark Mark.

"Oh, the hell you are," Nizar mutters, yanking his wand from his sleeve. He slices through Severus's jacket and shirtsleeve to bare his left forearm, where the skull of the Dark Mark seems to be giving him an ominous smile. Nizar takes a breath, slashes his fingertips open, and presses the bleeding wounds directly onto that serpent-accented skull.

Nizar closes his eyes. He can't just sever this, as he did with the blood magic lines from Friday's spell with the basilisk venom-infused blade. "There is something entwined here to prevent tampering. Sometimes he is very smart." He untangles the tampering magic, which looks like a warped and sickened Caterwauling Charm.

Voldemort is accessing the Mark, pushing his magic and his will through it in an attempt to gain control of one of his servants. Severus is smarter, better—mind magic probably saved his life tonight.

That distant foulness is coming through an altered, blood-fueled Summoning spell. It's a direct line of communication, one that tells the Death Eaters where to go when they're Summoned, but it's also Voldemort's means of sending pain. Nizar frowns when he realizes a Death Eater cannot send even messages back to Voldemort, as their own access to the spell has been blocked.

The blood-bound Killing Curse is one of the most terrifying things Nizar has ever discovered tied to a living being. He gasps aloud before disabling it, ripping out that magic. It was far too close to pulsing with life; Voldemort was preparing to activate it, killing Severus once he was certain that Severus was in Nizar's presence.

"Nizar?" Severus whispers.

"Hi there." Nizar smiles and cups the side of Severus's face with his palm. "How are you?"

Severus groans in pain, and when he speaks, his voice is a tired rasp. "I feel like hell. What happened?"

"You came in, and Voldemort was..." Nizar attempts to find the right word. "Trying to control you. Not succeeding very well, but succeeding enough that it was frightening."

Severus lifts his head long enough to see Nizar's bleeding fingertips plastered to the Dark Mark. "What are you doing?"

"Stopping him from being able to do that to you ever again," Nizar replies. "Oh, and I pulled out a fucking blood-bound Killing Curse. That's how he could reach through the Dark Marks and kill whoever displeased him."

Severus's eyes widen. "Thank you, then. I'm glad to have one less concern hanging over my head."

“You’re about to get rid of a few more.” Nizar closes his eyes again as he investigates the magic in the Dark Mark, the lingering feel of Voldemort’s presence, and the intentions he left behind. “He knows, Severus. Someone told him. Afterward, he used the Mark to access just enough of your thoughts to know for certain that you’re disloyal.”

“Margot...Dolohov.” Severus grimaces and lowers his head again. “I didn’t realize she’d left the Manor, probably before you and Salazar departed. She went straight to the Dark Lord.”

“How the hell did Voldemort get in?” Nizar asks. “I know you can shield your mind exceptionally well.”

Severus releases an unsteady breath. “If I wasn’t expecting that sort of intrusion to come through the Mark, then...Cruciatus.”

Dammit. “And it’s my fault, too. If I hadn’t pushed that hard when Ratier—”

Severus reaches up with one trembling hand and presses his fingers against Nizar’s lips. “It is not your fault. The Dark Lord would have discovered the truth at some point. It’s merely inconvenient that it is now.” He hesitates. “Could he be convinced still of my loyalty?”

Nizar shakes his head. “Severus, he sent you here to die in front of me. It’s not about loyalty any longer—it’s about what weapons he’ll choose to use against me.”

Severus closes his eyes. “Then...can you remove the Mark? Can you truly do so, Nizar?”

Nizar brushes his free hand through Severus’s tangled hair. “Severus, I never brag. If I say I can do something, then I can. Is that what you want? Will you let me get rid of this damned thing?”

“I’ve wanted it gone almost from the moment it was placed there,” Severus admits in a low voice.

“That is because you’re intelligent.” Nizar uses his left hand to press the tip of his wand to the edge of the Dark Mark without lifting his fingers. Nizar sifts through the blood magic’s many layers. Protean charm variant—clever, yes. The Tampering Charm, which was annoying, and the Summoning Charm.

“If my words do not distract you: how many forms of magic did he combine?” Severus’s question makes Nizar realize he’s been muttering aloud.

“Quite a few. I hope he never tells anyone how to create a blood-bound and linked Killing Curse,” Nizar says. “That is creative, and I’ll kill him just to make sure no one ever knows that it’s even possible.”

“You just told *me* that it’s possible.” Severus sounds exhausted.

“You find slavery abhorrent. I’m not concerned,” Nizar replies. “Voldemort does like his same variations on a theme. Beneath it all, it’s the same magical crafting he used to create the familial Blood Summons.”

Nizar prods his fingertips with his wand so they will release a fresh trickle of blood over the Mark. This time the Dark Mark soaks up his blood, pulling it into the magic embedded in Severus's skin.

"Hello. Don't I seem familiar?" Nizar smiles as the Mark accepts him as its creator. He now has complete access to everything that makes up the Dark Mark. The original blood magic is too crude, and recognizes not Voldemort's blood alone, but familial lineage.

"He's creative, but oh, so very stupid. Never assume you're the only surviving member of your family line if you're going to cast blood magic," Nizar says as he untangles every single differing bit of magic. "Otherwise, the spell will respond to everyone you're related to."

"That's nice to know," Severus whispers.

"In this case? Oh, yes." Nizar glares down at the snake when it emerges from the skull to look at him. He hisses at it in Parseltongue: "*You are no longer required here. Return to the place you came from.*"

The snake nods and crawls back inside the skull. A moment later, the skull itself is empty, its colors fading to the myriad shades of an old bruise.

Nizar feels sudden, intense nausea, and closes his eyes. Voldemort no longer has any sort of hold over Severus at all. Now it's *Nizar* who holds that power.

"Nizar? You're turning pale."

Nizar ignores the nausea so he can concentrate. "I could literally order you to do anything right now, and you would have no choice." He takes a breath and drags his thumbnail across the pads of his fingers to draw forth more blood.

At this point in the process, the blood remains on Severus's skin. It's a conduit, a fluid link that gives Nizar the direct means to draw out all of the remaining corrupt magic, much like sucking poison from a terrible wound.

A curse like this certainly qualifies as a wound. Nizar uses his wand to bind his hand at the wrist before that cursed blood can try to hijack along his veins and sicken his magical core. He really doesn't need to experience that again, especially not twice in one week.

Nizar gets up from the floor, oblivious to his surroundings as he keeps his concentration on maintaining that seal against the corrupt magic. His hand is going numb; inconsequential drops of blood are falling from his fingertips to the floor.

He goes into the nearest bathroom, gets his hand under the sink, and opens the cold tap. Several passes of his wand drive the foul magic from his sliced fingertips directly into the flow of water.

Nizar flinches when it sounds like something screams in response. Then it's gone, swept off into the plumbing to be broken apart by one of the Earth's primary elements.

He lets his fingers rest under the water until the flow of blood stops. Then he turns off the water and slumps down over the sink, soaking his sleeves in the wet sink basin.

Get up. Move, he orders himself, and straightens up. His reflection in the mirror reveals that he's sweat-soaked but not shaking. His eyes have the peculiar silver-tinged aspect he gets when he works directly with blood magic for more than just a simple bit of healing.

He goes back out to the parlor and finds that Severus has fallen asleep where Nizar left him on the floor. Nizar regards him for a moment, watching Severus breathe, and feels no lingering sense of contamination from Voldemort's magic.

Nizar puts one of the throw pillows beneath Severus's head, places the soft blanket from the back of the sofa over him, and then drops down in the armchair again. He intends to stay awake, to watch to make sure there aren't any complications from removing the Mark, but it isn't long at all before he nods off.

* * * *

It isn't a surprise to receive a summons to attend to Myrddin that evening. Nizar glances at Galiena. "Would you mind spending the night with Elesande, dearest? I need to go threaten to punch an old bastard again."

Galiena smiles. "I don't mind, Father. I'll go now, so I don't arrive late."

"Don't stay *awake* too late. You have lessons in the morning," Nizar reminds her. "I'll rouse you with a bucket of water if you're not at breakfast on time."

Galiena marches over and hugs him around the waist. "I'll be good, Father. Go bash him one, and you can tell me about it over the meal."

"Absolutely," Nizar says, and sends her off down the corridor to find the stairs. He sends a Patronus off to warn the children living in the bedrooms in Godric's tower, so the older students will know to expect her. With that done, he secures their home and goes to the grand stairs.

Myrddin is in Salazar's classroom, stirring a brew in the biggest bloody cauldron Nizar has ever seen outside of Little Hangleton. He knew they existed, but Salazar has had no need to use one. It's amusing how much it brings to mind something straight out of Shakespeare's play of Macbeth, one of the few that Hermione convinced him to read.

"Good, you are here. Sit, sit," Myrddin says, but he doesn't turn his attention away from the cauldron. Nizar watches, curious; the great pewter cauldron is large enough to drown a man, and the smell is mindful of freshly overturned earth.

He wouldn't think Myrddin was one of the most powerful magicians to exist, not at first glance. His hair is solid gray, though Nizar can see an intriguing play of color lurking beneath

the dull strands; his beard is close-cropped and bordering on mangy. His skin has the paleness of what Salazar told him is the old Gaul appearance, and his clothes are so close to layers of rags that it makes Helga want to tear out her own hair in frustration.

Myrddin's dark eyes are sharp and watchful. "You don't care for me very much, do you, my time-wandering friend?"

Nizar lifts one eyebrow. "I don't care how many years you've seen, or how much power you've wielded. When someone towers over a little girl and screams at her until she cries because she doesn't know one of *his* creations, all I see is an old man so desperate for acknowledgement that he'll torture the defenceless in a vain effort to seek it."

Myrddin tilts his head in acknowledgement before dropping an entire bundle of fresh adreminte into his cauldron. "Arthwys would have liked you," he mutters after a time. "He spent his rule trying to make up for the wrongs of his childhood, and would hold with no oppression of the weak."

Nizar crosses his arms and takes a guess. "And you hate him." Myrddin glances at him in surprise. "You hate that he died for those ideals, and thus you hate *him*."

"Sometimes," Myrddin admits with a grunt. "When you've lost someone, you'll understand why hate can bloom."

Nizar laughs at him, a sound of dry and bitter amusement. "My parents were murdered by an evil magician when I was just over a year old. That same bastard turned me into a soul jar for his own gains, though he did it wrong and paid for it with thirteen years of wandering without a body. My aunt and uncle treated me worse than the lowliest prisoner. All of my memories of them are dominated by enforced servitude, beatings, hunger, seeking food from the rubbish pile and being punished if I was caught eating it, endless toil, and even further punishment locked in a small space if I dared to fare better in my studies than my cousin. The first person I ever had any sort of romantic feelings for was killed by the same magician who murdered my parents, and I will never be able to stop believing that I'm partly to blame for that. I lost my godfather to a corrupt court that imprisoned him for years; even when the true culprit was discovered, my godfather remained a convict on the run, so he could not help me. Every year of my schooling, I was accused of being or becoming just like that evil magician because so many were afraid of me. Oh, and since a magician in my time sent me here, I've lost the few friends and loved ones I *did* have, forever.

"Tell me, Myrddin: have I lost enough yet?"

Myrddin stops stirring his massive potion and lifts out the silver rod, laying it across the cauldron before he taps his finger to the pewter rim. The potion freezes mid-swirl, caught in time until Myrddin is ready to resume brewing it.

"You are a defender," Myrddin says to Nizar. "A protector."

"When it's called for, yes."

"Why?" Myrddin asks, his brown eyes reflecting swirls of orange and gold in the torchlight.

“Why not?” Nizar counters. “Why should I let anyone suffer loss, pain, enslavement, or death when I have the means to save them? What is the point to magic if we’re not using it to do what we can to make things better?”

Myrddin considers that. “Suffering often brings wisdom.”

“The wisdom of knowing how to sneak food out of the rubbish without being caught?” Nizar shakes his head. “I might have learned to hate men had I not been able to escape to this school once I reached my eleventh year. What had the most profound impact on me, Sir Ancient Bastard, was the moment when someone reached down to take my hand, drew me up by their side, and called me their friend. Not for gain, not for prominence or wealth, but because that man saw a small child who needed help, and he provided it. That was all.

“Suffering also brings *pain*, Myrddin Wylt. It teaches you how terrible men can be, and the depth of that well is nigh bottomless. There are some who claw their way to the surface, but most of them remain lost there. Don’t they?”

Myrddin offers him a slow nod. “They do, yes. You are aware, no doubt, that none have dared to speak to me like this in hundreds of years?”

“Someone really should have done it sooner, then,” Nizar replies, irritated. “No one should become so blinded by someone’s prior accomplishments that they allow that same man to treat foully with others.”

“Hmm.” Myrddin smiles, revealing teeth that have yellowed with age but show no signs of decay. “You hold me no ill will at all, do you?”

“No, I don’t.” Nizar gives the old man a vague smile. “Make my daughter cry again, and that will change.”

“I came here because the leaves whispered to me.” Myrddin retrieves a wand from his sleeve that is still more tree branch than shaped wood, with a split of four small branches at the end of it. “They told me that a man had come from far away. He would be family to one of the Four, but he would not be matched to a particular corner of Hogewáp. He would stand beside them, above them. Not to rule, but to ensure that their work, their teachings, and their students would be safeguarded.”

“Trees are such sarding gossips, then,” Nizar says. “I’ve only done what is needed. No more than that.”

“No. You did what was needed even when it was distasteful. There is a difference.” Myrddin gazes down at his wand. “In the old days, we would have dubbed you *Bellum dux Magum*, which has fallen out of use. Now the Franks have brought forth the term *knicht*, but it is not the same thing.”

“*Bellum dux Magum*. War mage,” Nizar translates, trying not to feel uncomfortable. “A soldier.”

Myrddin shakes his head. “No. Not a mere soldier. Any child of man can pick up a sword and slay another. To pick up a wand and choose to defend is another matter entirely, for when we call magic, we gain the attention of the gods.”

“I wasn’t raised to follow any particular religion.”

Myrddin smiles. “But you’ve felt it. You’ve felt the presence of the other, that watchful stillness that comes while power sings in your blood.”

“I have. So have the other four,” Nizar admits, even though he doesn’t want to. “Sometimes it’s so intense it feels as if you could drown in it.”

“Yes. I have drowned within that song many, many times in my life. I then sought solace in the woods, among the scattered remains of my people, the new church that has come to the isle...” Myrddin frowns. “True strength, young magician, lies in never allowing that song to consume you. I’ve failed in that test many times, and these are words I’ve never spoken to another living soul.”

“Why me, then?” Nizar asks. “You have four magicians here who would be glad to hear you speak.”

“Because you are, and you are not, like they. You are all teachers, but you do not hold one of the four corners of Hogewáp’s magic. That task is theirs alone, just as your task will be yours alone.”

Nizar tries not to sigh. “Stop beating around the bush. What task, Myrddin?”

Myrddin seems amused by his words. “I am dying, Nizar Hariwalt of House Deslizarse. I have defended this school from enemies in such a way that Hogewáp never learned it had enemies at all. This place of learning deserved peace to begin its long task of becoming what it will be. When I die, new enemies will surge forth.” Myrddin holds out his hand. “Come here. I will harm you not, even though my jaw still aches.”

Nizar tries not to grimace. “Very well.” He reaches out and grasps the old man’s gnarled hand.

“You are *Nizar, Protector ex Hogewáp, Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis*.” Myrddin brushes Nizar’s hand with his odd wand, which sends the tingling itch of a minor electrical charge down his spine. “Then and now, you shall be.”

Nizar shakes his hand, discomfited, when Myrddin releases him. “What did you do?” he asks, trying to decide if he should be outraged.

“For all of your life, you will be tied to Hogewáp. Whether you are here or far away, if Hogewáp is threatened, you will know.” Myrddin carelessly drops his wand into a threadbare pocket. “The task I chose for myself, you chose for yourself also, even if you did not fully comprehend the whole of it. I gave you my awareness of Hogewáp, Protector. It is now solely your own. When you need to act as its defender, magic will answer you.”

Nizar rubs at the back of his neck when the sensation of electrical tingling won't bloody stop. "If that means I'm going to live to be as old as you, I'm not sure that was a very kind thing to do."

"To protect others often has nothing to do with kindness at all," Myrddin says in a light, airy tone that puts Nizar back in mind of the old man being mental. "But to live to be as old as me?" He chuckles. "Perhaps you will live even longer still."

"If that occurs, then I truly hope I won't be as much as a right bastard as you are," Nizar retorts.

Myrddin laughs again and picks up his silver stirring rod, unfreezing the potion from its held stasis. "We are all who we were, and we are all who we become."

"Mental," Nizar declares flatly, and goes to find Salazar. His brother is in his quarters on the fourth floor, sitting with Fortunata. Nizar's niece is scowling down at her scroll and quill with the expression of one who'd rather be turning it into ash. "Hi there. Zuri's asleep?"

"He is." Salazar glances up at him. "What was it like to be summoned to attend Myrddin?"

"I refused to apologize for punching him, and he refused to apologize for deserving it," Nizar replies, sitting down on a padded wooden chair opposite Salazar and Fortunata. "Oh, and I am apparently a titled war mage now."

Salazar's eye twitches. "You are *what*."

"*Protector ex Hogewáp, Britanni Bellum dux Magum, Defender ex Britanni Insulis*. Nizar the Protector." Nizar sighs in irritation. "The old bastard says that he is dying, and that someone has to take his link to Hogewáp so it will continue to be protected."

Salazar is still staring at him in blank amazement. "I didn't think there were any left alive on this isle who could declare a *Bellum dux Magum*. That is a tradition many rulers of the west have lost as the Church taught others to shun magic." Salazar frowns. "Myrddin is perhaps the last living being on this isle who could make such a declaration and have magic answer to it in truth."

"I didn't know any of that. I sort of want to punch him again," Nizar grouses, and Fortunata stops writing to giggle aloud. He's so glad to hear that sound, and from the fondness in Salazar's eyes, Nizar knows that Salazar is grateful, too.

Salazar grins. "You are also now not mere nobility, but *high-ranked* nobility."

"What? No!" Nizar spits. "Absolutely not!"

"You're a titled war mage. You are nobility of equal rank to my own title, little brother." Salazar's grin is merciless. "In times of war, you outrank everyone except the royal man or woman seated on the throne."

"Shit!" Nizar shouts. "That's stupid—I don't want that nonsense!"

“Tooooo baaaaad,” Fortunata sings under her breath, smiling.

Nizar glares at her. “That’s not helping!”

Salazar finally takes pity on him. “Little brother, Myrddin has no manners, but he has done nothing more than provide further means for you to continue to act in your violently retributive fashion against those that would bring harm. Is that truly so bad?”

“It’s itchy!” Nizar complains, and conjures a snowball to throw at his brother when Salazar starts howling with laughter.

* * * *

Nizar jerks awake with a start, lifting his head. The windows in the back of the flat are letting in enough sunlight to tell him that it’s well past dawn. He looks down and finds the floor empty of its occupant, with both blanket and pillow put back on the sofa. “Severus?”

“In here.”

Nizar gets to his feet and shakes off the last bit of clinging sleep, walking through the short hall to the kitchen. Severus is there with a paper sack, and the smell of tea and someone’s fresh scones scent the air. Severus’s hair is still damp from a bath, and he’s dressed in a clean shirt and trousers. “Good morning?” Nizar tries.

“For the first time in a very, very long time, I feel like I’m being honest when I say the same: good morning,” Severus replies. He smiles and then tilts his head towards the hall. “You still have blood on your hand and arm. Go wash, *Protectoris*.”

“Blow me,” Nizar mutters in response, getting clean clothes before shutting himself in their bedroom’s bathroom. He is going to turn this room into the equivalent of a steam bathhouse using the flat’s shower.

Why the hell did no one tell him showers existed? When he returns to Hogwarts in January, he’s convincing the castle to add one to his bathroom.

He gets out of the shower when the hot water becomes tepid, drying off before wrapping a towel around his waist. He has to dry the sink mirror multiple times while using it. He shaves for the morning and then rinses his face, thinking on that dream. On Myrddin.

Severus knocks on the door. “I did say wash, not drown yourself.”

“I didn’t drown. You can come in, if you want, as long as you don’t mind standing in the middle of a cloud.”

Severus opens the door and nearly flinches back from escaping steam. “You weren’t joking.”

“Not at all.” Nizar pushes his hair back from his face, which isn’t dripping but otherwise hasn’t dried at all. It’s always darker when it’s wet, closer to Salazar’s near-black hair.

“Are you all right?” Severus asks.

Nizar nods. “I was just thinking. When I dream, I sometimes remember...more.” He sighs and leans back against Severus’s chest when he wraps his arms around Nizar from behind. “I’ll get your shirt wet.”

“Drying Charms exist,” Severus replies, amused. “What were you dreaming about?”

“The night Myrddin gave me that fucking title.”

Severus meets Nizar’s eyes in the mirror. “One would think you were displeased.”

“One would think correctly,” Nizar replies sourly. “Protector of Hogewáp I’d figured out on my own, but War Mage, Defender of the Brittonic Isles? That is something entirely fucking different.”

“*Brittonnes*, then. Not *Britanni*,” Severus realizes.

“Not in those days, but the house-elves would have gone with the modern term.” Nizar sighs. “*We are all who we were, and we are all who we become*,” he whispers. “Fuck you, Myrddin.”

“That sounds quite similar to advice you gave me this past Saturday, though I prefer yours; it was more plainly spoken.”

“When Myrddin spoke plainly, it usually meant that things had gone to shit.” Nizar feels a brief moment of amusement. “He said that I chose it. Myrddin told me I chose that role even when I didn’t comprehend the whole of what I was choosing.”

“Oh, where do I begin?” Severus smirks at him. “One Philosopher’s Stone, one maddened basilisk, one shade of Tom Riddle, one werewolf, Sirius fucking Black, the Triwizard Tournament—”

“Yes, I’m aware of the fact that my own opinion of myself was that I was completely insane!”

“I just thought I’d point out that Myrddin was correct,” Severus says in a mild voice.

“That doesn’t make him any less of a bastard.”

“You have better manners, but you strike me otherwise as being quite similar, Nizar.” Severus pauses, as if thinking. “Last night, I learned that you entombed a man alive for at least three thousand years of suffering.”

Nizar stiffens and tries to step away. “Hold still, idiot,” Severus orders him. “I’m not going to castigate you. I just wished to know why you did so.”

“Why?” Nizar bares his teeth at his own reflection. “I ripped through that man’s mind looking for one thing, and one thing alone, Severus—a hint of remorse. Any inkling at all that he regretted what he’d done to my son, and to seventy-four innocent people. I found *none*. Nothing. That’s why there is a hill beyond Edinburgh that echoes with the faint sound of one man who is still screaming to this day. What’s your fucking point?”

“My point,” Severus murmurs against his neck, “is that you also have never done anything terrible to anyone without someone going well and truly beyond the point of deserving it. Merlin didn’t name you merely the protector of a school, but of the islands he loved.”

Nizar has no idea why he suddenly wants to weep, so he refuses to. “Some days I’m not certain what it is you see when you look at me.”

“Well, the same is certainly true in reverse. Some would claim we deserve each other,” Severus responds dryly. “I do seem to recall you saying last night that you could order me to do anything, and I would have no choice.”

“At that point in the removal process? Yes.” Nizar doesn’t quite repress a shiver of revulsion. “Everyone should be grateful that Voldemort was too busy thinking himself so very clever that he never realized he’d skipped a simple bit of magic that would have given him a mindless army to control instead of followers to terrify.”

“I know I’m grateful,” Severus says, “but not only for that. I looked at my arm this morning, and for the first time in so very long, I felt like I could breathe.”

That’s a bright spot, at least. “I’m glad.”

Severus touches Nizar’s chin with his fingertips. “Literally anything?”

“Well—yes, but it’s much more fun if someone is doing it because they want to.” Nizar smiles at their reflections, trying to break the tension in the room.

It doesn’t quite work the way he planned. “I agree.” Severus nuzzles against his face. “No one could remove the Dark Mark unless they were a Parselmouth, could they?”

“They could. Possibly.” Nizar half-closes his eyes in response to the clean-shaven skin rubbing at his cheek and neck. “It would be more complicated, perhaps.”

“And what would I owe you for this, then?” Severus breathes against his ear.

“Granting someone their freedom is never meant to create debt or obligation. To ask for either—that’s a transfer of ownership, not freedom. No. Some things are not bargained for.”

Severus’s hand drifts down to trace the column of Nizar’s neck. “Does thanking you become a debt, then?”

Nizar’s eyes roll back as teeth latch onto his earlobe. “No—no, that’s just gratitude, that’s... uh...oh, gods.” His words end on an inarticulate gurgle with Severus tugs the towel around his hips free and presses his hand against Nizar’s half-hard prick.

Severus's laughter feels like a gentle rumble against his back. "Causing you to shut up is enthralling." He gently turns Nizar around in place before leaning down to kiss him. Nizar shoves his hand into Severus's hair and pulls him in closer, a wetter kiss with a hint of tongue. Severus's hand does an excellent job of teasing him to his full length.

Nizar opens his eyes when the kiss stops to discover Severus is gazing down at him. The dark metallic hues of an asphalt rainbow halo are turning his eyes into incredible pools of fascinating color. "Severus?"

Severus nuzzles him again. "The last time I knelt before someone, I hated him. Every time I've knelt to someone, it's been someone I've loathed." His thumb brushes over Nizar's lower lip. "That," he says, "is no longer the case."

"What do you—fuck!" Nizar yelps, the last coherent thing he says before Severus kneels down in front of him and takes Nizar into his mouth.

Nizar flings out his arms, scrambling to find a handhold before he falls backwards into the sink. He clings to the wall with one hand as the feel of a velvet tongue massaging the underside of his prick makes his toes curl back. Severus rests his hands on Nizar's waist, his thumbs tracing gentle circles over his skin as he encourages Nizar's hips to rock forward.

The pace is slow, steady, and completely maddening. "Severus!" Nizar whines, tangling his free hand in Severus's hair. The result is a smug chuckle that reverberates against hypersensitive flesh, making his hips buck.

Severus chuckles again and then swallows him down. At the same time, his fingernails scrape along his sensitive backside and down the backs of his thighs. Nizar shouts just before he's coming, shocked whimpers alternated with panted breaths.

When Severus stands up, he kisses Nizar. A faint hint of intriguing bitterness lingers in his mouth. "I do adore the fact that you look like you've completely taken leave of your senses."

"That's because you cheat," Nizar gasps as he tries to remain standing on trembling knees. "Cheating is excellent."

Severus looks smug. "Properly applied cheating," he says, just before wrapping his arms around Nizar in a rib-crushing embrace. "Never once, in my entire life, did I ever believe I would be happy," he whispers.

Nizar rests his head against Severus's shoulder, closing his eyes. "Neither did I."

Four Embedded Blighters

Chapter Summary

“Mister Padfoot thinks Mister Prongs does not know how to name children.”

“How is it you’re so fucking alert this morning?” Nizar asks, sipping at his tea when he finally can get his hands on a cup. “I still feel like I’ve been hammered into the ground, and I’m not the one who was tortured last night.”

“The elves would argue that a powerful magical working is a reason to feel that way.” Severus sits down on the sofa across from Nizar with his legs crossed, letting one of his bare feet dangle in the air. “And I’m cheating.”

“Ah. Potion?” Nizar asks, trying to find a comfortable spot in the armchair cushion after he squashed it for most of the night.

“One that I used to call ‘Fuck This, But I Have to Pretend to be a Functional Person So I Don’t Kill Everyone.’ Lily wanted it to have a shorter name, but at age fourteen, all I could think of was, ‘Fuck This.’” Severus tilts his head. “Eventually, I settled on the far more innocuous name of Tolerantu.”

“They all sound accurate. Do you have more?”

Severus’s smile is too sharp not to be mischievous. “Do you wish to vomit it up again in an hour? It’s a requirement of ingesting the potion.”

“No.” Nizar hopes his expression conveys his displeasure at the idea. “What the hell is in it?”

“Three different items that are beneficial unless they linger in the body for more than an hour and fifteen minutes, after which they become toxic,” Severus answers. “Hence, regurgitating it...and also saving Tolerantu for days when I feel so much worse than the minor inconvenience involved in sicking it back up.”

“How are you feeling, then?”

Severus hesitates. “Lighter. Granted, I’ve also spent most of the morning trying to figure out what in the *hell* I’m going to tell Albus.”

“Tell him the truth,” Nizar suggests. “You were discovered and it nearly got you killed. Unless you think he’d truly have a problem with you still being alive.”

“Not that, but Nizar—I’m supposed to be *looking* for someone,” Severus reminds him.

“Good point.” Nizar leans back in the chair with his tea when he’s confident he won’t spill it. “And I’m still not in the mood to tell him he doesn’t need to be looking any longer. I said I wouldn’t give that man back his sacrificial lamb, and I meant it.”

“You are most certainly not anyone’s sacrificial lamb. Not any longer, and not for a very long time.”

“Yes, but…” Nizar hesitates, trying to put suspicion to words. “I think that Dumbledore would do his best to restructure his plans in an attempt to use me as such, anyway.”

Severus frowns, but doesn’t look convinced. “What bloody purpose would that serve?”

“If he believed that doing so was the only way to destroy Voldemort?” Nizar waits until Severus grimaces in acknowledgement. “Dumbledore would think it served the best sort of purpose.”

“But we know it’s the damned Horcruxes. The entire Order knows, since you refused to let that knowledge go unspoken,” Severus says.

“But relying on the deaths of only those other Horcruxes doesn’t fit the prophecy. Not from what Dumbledore can see,” Nizar says, and then scowls. “Horcruxes. Those fucking Horcruxes.”

“What about them?”

“Each time you put a piece of yourself in a fucking jar, part of your magic goes with you, as your magic is also a component of your soul. A magical core and a soul—well, depending on your religious views, there really isn’t much of a difference between them.” Nizar finishes his tea and puts the cup aside on a table. “Voldemort has to have made at least three soul jars, or that slice to the face and its accompanying basilisk venom would have killed him once that serpent-Horcrux died. The soul shard in myself was removed centuries ago. Thus, there is at least one more.”

Severus slaps his hand over his eyes and groans in dismay. “No. There were *four*. That fucking diary!”

“Are you about to tell me something I won’t like?”

“A soul jar is literally a piece of one’s soul?” Severus repeats, and Nizar nods. “That possession Tom Riddle left behind in the school, the one you wanted to be certain had become an ex-possession. When it temporarily stole Miss Weasley’s magic, it gained sentience and form—*his* form.”

“A diary stabbed with a basilisk fang—a blood link to Voldemort that was severed by basilisk venom.” Nizar stares at Severus. “Fuck.”

Severus makes a face. “Indeed.”

“Voldemort has given up at least four parts of his magic, and he has absolutely no idea he’s done so.” Nizar starts to smile. “Three of those parts have been destroyed in a way that he

can never reclaim. He might have been the most powerful wizard in Britain once upon a time...”

Severus’s eyes widen before he begins to smile as well. “But no longer. How many times can a soul be split, Nizar?”

“Severus, I have no idea. Those of us who specialized in this would have considered Tom Riddle insane after the first attempt, let alone doing so *four fucking times*.”

Severus turns his head to the door when someone’s firm hand raps on it five times. “Oh. Company.” He retrieves his wand. “One way or another, I might have been followed last night.”

“Maybe,” Nizar murmurs. “Five times, though.” He gets out his wand, hesitates, and hammers on the table with his fist three times, then seven times.

The knock at the door repeats the three knocks, pauses, and then rings out five more times. Nizar puts his wand down on the arm of the chair. “Salazar.”

Severus lowers his wand but doesn’t put it away until he hears the rattle of a key in the lock. “How did you know?”

“Prime numbers,” Nizar replies as the door swings open. “Good morning, Sal.”

Salazar shuts the door before turning to look at both of them. “Is it? I was concerned I’d be coming over to clean up a bloody mess!”

“Heard about last night, did you?” Severus asks dryly.

“Heard about it—fucking *hell*, Severus Snape!” Salazar retorts. “One of mine in the Underground bloody witnessed it. He wasn’t certain if Voldemort sent off a dying man or a walking corpse!”

“Not the latter, but it was definitely close to being the former,” Nizar says. “There is a blood-bound Killing Curse buried in all of the differing magics that make up the Dark Mark, Sal. Removing that meant Voldemort couldn’t do what he’d planned, which was to make me really, really angry.”

“Remove it?” Salazar looks at Severus, who holds up his left arm. Severus left his sleeves rolled back to his elbows for the first time since Nizar knew him as a teenager. “Removed the entire thing, then. Thank the gods. If you’d not figured out it wasn’t safe to go back, those were to be my next words.”

“No, I gathered as much from the torture, and by the fact that he gained access to my thoughts by using the damned Mark,” Severus replies.

“Someone has been studying up on their own work to see what they can truly do with it.” Nizar sighs. “For once, I’ve been a good influence, and it’s to the wrong fucking person.”

“Not merely the once, but in this case, yes, I do wish Voldemort had continued to be fucking oblivious.” Salazar flops down in the armchair closest to the fireplace, a ferocious scowl on his face. “At least I was able to deal with the one responsible. I hope no one needed Margot Dolohov for anything in particular, as there isn’t much left to be using her for.”

“Dammit, Salazar!” Nizar glares at him. “That was my kill!”

“Not today. You can still have Voldemort.” Salazar glances at Nizar. “Besides, that man may one day be my brother-in-law. I’m feeling possessive, too.”

Nizar rolls his eyes. “You don’t actually know that for certain.”

“Nizar.” Salazar gives him a flat look of irritation. “You’ve never courted *anyone*. I think it’s quite likely, thank you.”

“Fuck you.”

“You were being literal.” Nizar looks at Severus, whose expression has frozen somewhere between wonder and apprehension. “You said you’d never done this before, but I didn’t take your meaning properly.”

“Well, since *someone* has an overly large mouth that likes to spill every single truth he knows like a gossiping sarding *tree*, now you do,” Nizar says testily, crossing his arms.

Salazar grins. “I’ve not heard the term *sarding* in a very long time. What caused that one to turn up again?”

“Fucking Myrddin,” Nizar grumbles.

“That would do it,” Salazar says. “Gods know I cursed him often enough during my apprenticeship. This blood-bound Killing Curse—can you remove it without removing the other parts of the Dark Mark?”

“Yes, considering it was one of two things I got rid of before I bothered with the rest. Tampering,” Nizar adds when Salazar gives him a curious look. “He has them all warded against tampering, but I’m a dirty cheat.”

“So am I.” Salazar’s eyes narrow in thought. “I don’t have your mastery in this, *hermanito*. Is this something I can do?”

“Easily,” Nizar says. “The hard part is the removal itself, and even that you can learn if you were to see it done.”

Salazar nods. “Then tell me what to do. Some of mine are in grave danger if Voldemort starts using the Marks to dig through minds, which—that does give him a way around modern Occlusion?”

“Combined with torture, it was quite effective,” Severus answers for him. “He didn’t get everything; Voldemort has no idea as to Nizar’s original identity, among other important truths. Voldemort was looking specifically for betrayal based upon Margot Dolohov’s word,

so that is all he searched for. I *think* that with advance warning, it will be easier to defend against the intrusion.”

Salazar nods. “Better to know of the danger and at least be making the attempt at defence, yes.”

“Who, Sal? Who is it?” Nizar asks. He’s hoping that there are Slytherin names on that list—that they’re not dead, after all.

“I can’t tell you that, not either of you,” Salazar replies, “and it’s not about a lack of trust. It’s a lack of safety for everyone involved. There are two members of the Underground whose identities even *I* don’t know.”

Nizar teaches Salazar how to gain temporary access to the Dark Mark (“Gods, brother, but he’s an idiot,” Salazar declares.) and then how certain removals will involve recognizing the individual magics. “I think the worst problem you’re going to have is needing to put *back* the tampering charm after the blood-bound Killing Curse is removed. He might not think to explore the rest of the magic, but if the tampering magic is gone, even that stupid fuck is going to realize something’s not right.”

“If I can remove it, I can put it back,” Salazar says, unconcerned.

“Most likely.” Nizar thinks on it. “Don’t lift your bleeding hand from the Mark until you’re utterly done, though. I don’t know what would happen if you tried to access the Mark a second time to put something back. Best not to chance it.”

“Speaking of things not to chance.” Severus looks at Salazar. “You asked me a question the other day about a certain item. I’ve changed my mind; I think you should give it to him.”

Salazar seems intrigued. “What changed your mind?”

“What item?” Nizar asks, curious.

Severus smirks at Nizar but answers Salazar. “What changed my mind is that Nizar nearly broke my hand when he heard a very specific song on an album, one I showed him when I heard him playing the melody on a recorder.”

Salazar glances at his brother. “‘Wish You Were Here,’ wasn’t it?”

Nizar tilts his head in the direction of the turntable. “Which you seem to own.”

“I do.” Salazar gives Nizar a grief-laden smile. “The first time I heard that song, I was in London, 1975. I walked past a record store, heard the opening chords, and thought I was about to have a massive coronary on a crowded city walk. I went straight into that shop and bought the album. Then I heard the last section of it proper for the first time, and...well, there is no place for miserable depression in the midst of a magical war, much as I wished to indulge otherwise.”

“I’ve thought much the same since Hallowe’en,” Nizar says in a dry voice. Then his expression shifts to bewilderment. “I remember her, Sal. I remember her singing that song. I

just—I never remembered *anything* before.”

“You did; you just remembered the worst thing,” Salazar counters gently. “The last thing.”

“Oh.” Nizar grimaces. “Glad that memory’s gone, then.”

“But, I do see what Severus means.” Salazar retrieves a shrunken item from an inner coat pocket, uses his wand to restore a book to full size, and hands it to Nizar.

“What is this?” Nizar asks, but then he flips open the cover and goes utterly still. It’s a magical photograph of three people. One is the red-haired, emerald-eyed woman he caught a random mental glimpse of thanks to the Missing Child poster in Diagon Alley. That is James Potter, Lily Potter...and himself as an infant, not even a year old.

“Why do you—why do you have this?” Nizar flips through the pages and discovers that the entire book is devoted to moving photographs of James and Lily, or of his infant self with one or both parents.

“Thirty-first July. That’s the only thing a much younger *hermanito* asked me to look after,” Salazar tells him. “I promised I would. I just didn’t mention I’d be able to give it back to you so soon.”

“I actually have no idea what to say,” Nizar admits, and then frowns. There is instinct trying to happen, something wanting him to skip past all the photographs to the back of the album. He does so, brow furrowed, as he runs his fingertips along the edges of the inside back cover. “Oh, hello...”

“Were you being clever?” Severus sounds amused.

“I think I must have been. There’s something hidden back here.” Nizar uses the edge of his thumbnail to pry up the thin layer of velvet lining the leather. Beneath it is what appears to be a tiny replica broom that isn’t a replica at all, not with that sort of magic attached.

Salazar starts laughing when Nizar places the shrunken broom on the low coffee table. “No wonder you only asked for that. That’s a clever hiding place, little brother.”

“I imagine he—I must have been hiding it from the Dursleys.” Nizar rolls his eyes when Salazar gives him a sharp look. “It’s only been a week. It’s still fucking *odd*, Sal.” He reaches beneath the velvet again and pulls out a well-folded and flat piece of paper. That and the broom are the only two hidden items, so Nizar presses the velvet back against the leather, where it sticks without showing a hint of being disturbed in the first place.

Nizar moves the tiny broom to one side and unfolds the paper on the coffee table. Somehow, he isn’t surprised to see nothing written on it. “Oh, another blank bit of paper. What are you, I wonder?”

Ink appears in stark black letters, as if someone is actively writing their response with a quill.

“*Mister Prongs suggests that someone ought to be using the password.*”

“Mister Wormtail agrees with Mister Prongs and thinks that someone is using something that doesn’t belong to him.”

“Doesn’t belong to me, my entire backside,” Nizar growls back. “Did you write magical property laws of ownership into this thing?”

“Mister Padfoot is giving Mister Moony such a look right now.”

“Mister Moony did his research, because he is not a blithering idiot.”

“Oh, I just bet you did,” Severus murmurs. That seems to anger the map, which breaks out in a chorus of insults:

“Mister Moony thinks the greasy git should not be looking at what doesn’t belong to him, either.”

“Mister Wormtail would like to remind the Professor Snape to wash his slimy hair.”

“Mister Padfoot still can’t comprehend that someone made the idiot git a Professor.”

“Mister Prongs would like to add that the Professor Snape really shouldn’t be near Hogwarts at all.”

“I’m going to set this fucking piece of paper on fire,” Nizar says flatly.

“Mister Prongs thinks one might be being too hasty!”

“Meet the Marauder’s Map,” Severus says, ignoring the words of Padfoot, Wormtail, Prongs, and Mooney. “Yes, it was them.”

Nizar frowns. “Still not any less inclined to destroy it for being an insulting and therefore worthless piece of shit.”

“Worthless? Mister Padfoot would like to state that this document isn’t worthless at all!”

“Mister Wormtail would like to mention how much work he put into helping it become itself.”

“Oh, really.” Nizar crosses his arms. “And was this before or after you tried to get Remus Lupin to kill someone during the full moon, Sirius Black?”

“Mister Prongs would like to say that Mister Padfoot would never do such a thing.”

“Wrong. He did. You weren’t a very nice person, either.”

“Mister Padfoot is wondering who the hell he is talking to.”

Nizar raises an eyebrow and opens his mouth to reply when the words freeze in his throat.

“Right. Magically binding limitations. I’m James Potter’s son.” There; the magical adoption contract can’t argue with that.

“Mister Moony would just like to say that the idea of Mister Prongs ever having a child is the most terrifying concept in existence.”

“Mister Prongs would like to tell Mister Moony to go walk off a cliff.”

“Magical inheritance law, you embedded bits of four magical blighters,” Nizar says. “I own this document. How the fuck do I use it?”

“Mister Padfoot is not convinced.”

“Do I sound like I give a shit, Black?” Nizar asks, and Salazar snorts out a laugh.

“Mister Prongs is telling Mister Padfoot to behave himself.”

“Mister Moony is telling James Potter’s son that one must solemnly swear to be up to no good.”

Nizar glances at Salazar and grins. “Are we up to no good?”

“Up to our eyeballs in it, no less,” Salazar replies.

“Fine, then. I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good,” Nizar says, and black ink begins spreading across the page.

Both of Salazar’s eyebrows rise. “That’s a map of the entirety of Hogwarts, minus a few key details. No wonder you kept it hidden.”

“This map did *not* make my life any easier,” Severus mutters.

The map of Hogwarts is three-dimensional, despite the flat nature of the paper, and shows them every floor of every area of the castle. Most areas are identified by room use, living areas, offices, classrooms, storage—it’s an immense portrait of the whole of Hogwarts.

“This is a constantly updating map, Severus.” Nizar points at a dot labeled Albus Dumbledore, which is descending the circular staircase from the headmaster’s office. “It’s not just stagnant. I imagine this is happening in real time, right now.”

“It is,” Severus confirms. “Again I reiterate: Not. Any. Easier.”

“And there is another one moving about.” Salazar points at the dot labeled Minerva McGonagall, which is in an area labeled Professor McGonagall’s quarters.

Nizar studies the seventh floor. “My classroom isn’t on here. Nor my quarters.”

“Mine aren’t, either. I imagine the four didn’t succeed in mapping much of the dungeons.” Severus runs his finger along the map without touching the paper. “They found the Slytherin Common Room’s entrance, but it’s blank beyond that point. The hallway for my quarters is there, but not the door. The massive ballroom near the Potions classroom is present, though.”

“Ballroom?” Salazar looks offended. “We used that room for dueling practice if the weather prohibited outdoor play, at least until Nizar created his classroom and home.”

“It was also supposed to be a ballroom,” Nizar tells Severus. “But convincing four nobles who were already sick to death of Court by age five to desire otherwise...”

“Like Godric and hose,” Salazar mutters. “Of course, I oft felt the same.”

“This map is amazing, and also appalling. This is the ultimate spying tool. No privacy for anyone,” Nizar says.

“It’s war time,” Severus reminds him. “I’m not fond of the idea that this was in the hand of a student—any student—but if the need is dire...”

“That’s how they found Pettigrew, isn’t it?” Nizar realizes. “I recall that conversation, but some of the details were left out.”

Severus eyes him, well aware of why certain details were lacking. “It was, yes. Apparently an Animagus is tagged by their real name even if they’re in their animal form.”

“All right. Listen up!” Nizar says to the map. “I know you four embedded blighters can hear me!”

The words of the quartet form directly over the map’s inked layout. “*Mister Prongs is listening, though Mister Prongs would like to know what to be calling the son of James Potter.*”

“*Mister Moony would just like to add that he is still horrified that Mister Prongs procreated.*”

“I’m Nizar.”

“*Mister Padfoot thinks Mister Prongs does not know how to name children.*”

“Fuck you, too,” Nizar retorts. “Listen. Stop insulting Severus Snape.”

“*Mister Wormtail has no intentions of stopping!*”

“*Mister Moony would like to remind all and sundry of the nature of the greasy git.*”

“*Mister Prongs is telling them to shut up and wishing to know why Nizar Potter—*” The map’s writing goes jagged and uneven when it attempts to name Nizar as such when the adoption magic comes into play. “*Well, that didn’t work. Mister Prongs would like Nizar to say why he wants the insults to stop, please.*”

“Because it’s not 1975 anymore, you idiots. It’s the end of 1995, and you’re currently *allies*,” Nizar emphasizes.

“*Mister Padfoot refuses to believe that he would ever ally with a greasy git future Death Eater!*”

Severus jerks back from the map. “At the time, I was no such fucking thing!”

“Mister Prongs is reminding Mister Padfoot to shut up, as we are magical bits of consciousness.”

“Mister Moony adds that we forgot to add the concept of the passage of time to these embedded bits of personable magical consciousness, and thus we actually are blithering idiots.”

“Mister Prongs will do his best to ensure that the insults are kept to a minimum.”

“Mister Wormtail is reminding everyone that the insulting magic is embedded in the document.”

“Mister Prongs is thinking Mister Wormtail didn’t pay attention to the part where he said he would do his best to keep the insults to a minimum!”

“Mister Padfoot thinks you’re all idiots and has no intention of doing any such thing.”

Nizar leans in close to the map, even though it’s a meaningless gesture. “Hey, Sirius Black. You married my parents.”

“Mister Moony would just like to point out that he is going to laugh forever at that revelation.”

“Mister Prongs is going to be smug forever at that revelation.”

“Mister Wormtail is going to be ill.”

“Mister Padfoot might be more inclined to try not to be an insulting twat, but first Mister Padfoot wants to know if this was a marriage that happened before Nizar’s birth.”

“Legally, you’re a parent. Congratulations,” Nizar says, giving Severus a wry look. “How the hell do I turn off this map?”

“Mister Prongs is informing Nizar that one must say their mischief to be managed.”

“Uh—mischief managed?” Nizar tries, and the map goes blank. “Okay, then. That was enlightening. I think.”

Severus massages his temples with his fingertips. “I’m going to spend the rest of the holiday reminding myself that two of those idiots did bother to mature. Somewhat.”

“How did you find out about Sirius Black’s triad marriage with the Potters?” Salazar asks. “There are not many who know of that.”

“How do *you* know?” Nizar counters.

Salazar shrugs in response. “I made it my business to know, for obvious reasons.”

“There is a family tree in the Black family townhouse in London. They’re linked together on it,” Nizar answers. “Among other people.”

“I didn’t know such a thing existed.” Salazar stands up. “I have to go. The sooner I remove the threat of death bound up in those damned Marks, the happier many of us are going to be.”

“All right.” Nizar and Severus stand as well, though Nizar is the one who immediately hugs Salazar. “When are you coming back?”

“I did mean what I said about giving the two of you some time alone,” Salazar replies, smiling. “Compitalia. That’s appropriate enough, I think.”

“Compitalia,” Nizar repeats. “Dusk?”

“Absolutely. Severus?” Salazar holds out his arm and waits until Severus grips it. “Make him buy clothing from this century.”

“There isn’t a damned thing wrong with what I’m wearing!” Nizar snaps in annoyance.

Salazar grins at him. “Preservation spells or not, it’s all still over a thousand years old, brother. You might need something in order to fit in with the non-magical crowds one day.”

Nizar rolls his eyes and shoves his brother out of the parlor and through the door. “See you next Tuesday, you complete shit.”

“Tuesday!” Salazar agrees cheerfully, right before Nizar shuts the door on him.

Silver

Chapter Summary

"If we weren't walking targets before the twenty-fifth, we sure as hell are now."

Severus picks up the shrunken broom and lets it rest on his fingertip. "That does explain why no one found a Firebolt when searching the Dursley home this past summer. That's a well-done shrinking spell, too."

"I wonder who performed it for him—me—fuck," Nizar grumbles under his breath. "I suppose it doesn't matter." He reaches into his trouser pocket, a *useful* modern addition the elves made to his clothes that Nizar didn't argue with, and pulls out a small, thin box. He opens it and pulls out a second shrunken broom about the size of the first. "I do not need two brooms. Do you want that one?"

Severus gives him an odd look. "I own a serviceable broom, and I can bloody well Apparate."

"Not what I asked, and Apparition doesn't solve everything. Can that 'serviceable broom' outfly a dragon?"

Severus rubs at his temples again. "Why would I need to outfly a dragon?"

"Because I have apparently done that three times now, and why take chances on angering another?" Nizar replies, grinning. "Of course, I've long thought it was just twice, only one of which was my fault."

Severus retrieves his wand long enough to unshrink the original Firebolt, which is in pristine condition and almost as magically strong as the one Nizar purchased. "Dare I ask about either time? I'm well aware of the third, having watched that insanity unfold."

"The first time, Godric levitated a giant. Then Godric dropped a giant. Did you know if you drop a giant in the Highlands, all of the dragons in the area get really upset?" Nizar smiles. "Yes, there was Desplazarse—Apparition, I mean, but we needed to keep the dragons away from villages and towns until they calmed down and went home. That did require flying faster than the dragons to avoid being set on fire or eaten."

"And the second time?" Severus asks.

Nizar frowns, trying to remember. "Dragon scales," he says. "I needed dragon scales for some purpose. Oh! Right. It was just going to be a quick retrieval of dragon scales, but some dragons like to hoard things. This one decided to hoard its own fucking shed scales because they were shiny."

“And you had a broom then as well, I assume.”

“Of course I did.” Nizar resizes the broom he’s holding. “We all built our own. I’ve no idea why that’s fallen out of favor.”

“Licensing and profit-mongering, most likely,” Severus says while staring at the resized broom. “A Firebolt Five. You’re not serious.”

“It was the only thing in the shop that was decently built,” Nizar answers, glancing back and forth between the brooms. “Oh, they went from ebony to *linta* wood. Good choice, even if they had to wrap the *linta* in carved cedar to keep it from shattering the first time it hit the ground too hard.”

“*Linta*?” Severus is still glaring at the Firebolt Five. “Do you have any fucking idea how much those things cost?”

“Since I bought it? Yes. *Linta* is...” Nizar glances at the ceiling until he recalls the word in English. “Linden wood.”

“Ah. Associated with magnetism, adhesion, and gravity, or its particular nuances for ignoring all three.” Severus shrinks the Firebolt back down to the size it had been at discovery. “If I did take this, would you be insulted if I then sold it?”

“As it would be your belonging being sold, no, I wouldn’t, but I *would* be very surprised that you’d give up a tool that literally has the potential of being life-saving,” Nizar says.

“Not necessarily,” Severus murmurs.

Nizar studies him. “Are we about to have a very awkward conversation about money?”

“I’m a teacher, Nizar, not nobility. I don’t actually...” Severus looks uncomfortable. “A teacher’s salary is nothing grand. I make up a great deal of those losses by my side projects with potions.”

“I have a feeling I’ll be yelling about the twentieth century again. You’ve been teaching at that school since 1982. What does Dumbledore pay you per year?”

“A thousand Galleons. It’s a full-time professor’s standard,” Severus replies.

“That’s it. Just a flat thousand Galleons for everyone,” Nizar says, wanting to be certain he’s correct.

Severus frowns. “Yes, and that was after Albus petitioned the governing board to raise the yearly pay three times from the time he took the Headmaster’s position. It was seven-fifty in 1982.”

“What the fu—how does that—¿*Qué puto mierda? ¿De quién es esa maldita idea? ¿Qué puto mierda! ¿Esa es la tontería más idiota que he escuchado en toda mi vida!*”

Severus lifts an eyebrow. “Am *I* about to be unhappy about something regarding the twentieth century?”

Nizar pinches the bridge of his nose. “Maybe!” He takes a breath and releases it before he tries to launch into another tirade in Castellano. “For the first concern: everything in my vault, I was not given; I earned it. I was a teacher for twenty-five years, but I also earned gold via other means, most of which I do not currently recall,” he adds when the memories simply aren’t there. “Technically, I’m also supposed to have access to Salazar’s vault. It’s the primary for the Deslizarse bloodline, but that access seems to have been revoked, possibly when they moved the vaults from Inverness to London.

“To the second concern: the Founders valued their teachers, since they understood both the difficulty and the danger involved in teaching magic. Five hundred Galleons a year was the pay for full-time teaching in fucking 990, Severus. It’s been a thousand years since that time. It should be fifteen hundred to two thousand Galleons per year by now, at the very *least*.”

“I was right, I’m not happy to hear that.” Severus leans back against the sofa, scowling. “It’s a chronic condition of educational employment in Britain, though. Educators in Britain have average earnings of about twenty thousand pounds per year.”

“*Esto es una mierda de caballo tan completa*,” Nizar mutters. “Between seeing what things cost in London these last few days, and listening to you talk about it at length on some occasions in the past...how the *fuck* is anyone supposed to subsist on that without starving?”

“Have well-off or wealthy parents, a wealthy benefactor, related or otherwise, a spouse with a better job, or hope to God your flat or your house is already paid for and you only need worry about public utility costs,” Severus answers. “You really earned the entire contents of your vault?”

“Remember the conversation we had about gifts over a cauldron?” Severus nods. “Same problem,” Nizar says. “Which is why I’m not completely baffled by you wanting to sell a broom. I’d prefer you didn’t, but I understand it.”

Severus stares at him before picking up the Firebolt and placing it into Nizar’s palm. “Keep it until you find someone who truly needs this kind of tool. In the meantime, get a coat or a cloak and then come with me. I need to show you something.”

* * * *

To his surprise, Severus Apparates them back to Hogwarts, though they’re on the forest’s eastern border where the wards don’t reach. “I’m assuming it’s magic-related, then.”

“You assume correctly.” Severus looks nervous. “There are two people who know about this. One of them is dead and one is the enemy. I literally do not need a broom.”

“You weren’t surprised when I mentioned Rubeus and flying.” Nizar grins at Severus and feels like bouncing on his toes again for the first time in months. “You can fly!”

“And you’re not surprised that it’s possible, whereas everyone else refuses to believe it at all.” Severus’s voice is thick with annoyance. “Levitation is the most I’ve heard considered as legitimate magic, and usually it must be demonstrated first.”

“Well, it’s really fucking *difficult* magic, so I’m not surprised most are willing to disdain it. Only a few magic-workers per generation figure it out, and they often start very young,” Nizar says.

“But you don’t fly. If you did, you would have ignored the broom.”

“I’ll tell you something that’s not a secret at all: I actually do like Quidditch, just not enough to want to find one of those mysterious professional teams. They make you use a broom for playing the game,” Nizar replies, and Severus rolls his eyes. “But no, I don’t fly; levitation only. Godric’s wife Sedemai, though—she could fly. She used the skill to taunt Godric, but to be fair, he usually deserved it. Also, the man couldn’t even fly a broom to save his own hide, so that just made it even better. Are you going to show me, or what?”

“You’d have to shut up long enough for that—Nizar. Not. In. The. Forest,” Severus grates out.

Nizar gives him an innocent smile. “You started it.” He unshrinks the Firebolt Five again and mounts the broom, lifting off nearly twenty feet before he can get it to brake. “This thing really should come with a liability waiver for instant death by plowing into solid objects!” he shouts, circling back around. “Sorry. It’s new and it does not believe that friction exists!” Then he realizes that Severus is hovering off the ground at almost the same height, regarding him with crossed arms and a smug look. “Ah, there’s the showing off.”

Severus’s expression turns bland. “Blame your mother.”

“For what, you showing off?” Nizar asks. “Given who she married, I could easily be convinced of such.”

“Lily Evans could fly before her first year at Hogwarts. She taught me how.”

Nizar lets the broom pace itself in a slow drift, since holding it completely still is making the magic flare in tempestuous response. Severus follows him at the same speed, the magic he’s using making it seem as if his robes are flowing out behind him like the great stretch of a black wing.

“Two magicians of the same generation in the same neighborhood. That’s amazing,” Nizar says, and then realizes something. “You never intended to tell him, did you? Not any of it.”

Severus gives him a dry look. “To tell *you* at that age? No, I’d no intention of doing so at all. I had no intentions of informing anyone of anything. I didn’t expect to survive Voldemort’s return, either by his seeing my survival as a betrayal, or dying by some other means.”

Nizar has automatically directed their flight in the direction of the school and decides to just enjoy it. “I’ve been curious about something. Are you so offended by Quidditch that you’ll leave if I test this thing on the pitch?”

Severus makes an amused sound. “No, Nizar. I don’t actually hate the game. I just hate *losing* the game.”

“Given the stakes placed on it, and that no one seems to play it at any other time? I’m not surprised by that at all. Are you going to fly all the way there?”

“You are,” Severus points out. “I don’t often have the opportunity to do this, since I don’t share the skill with others.”

Nizar smiles. “You’re wearing all black against a daylight sky. You don’t exactly blend in.”

“I have it on good authority provided by that stupid map that there are exactly six people in the castle right now, and I will lie to every single one of them if they think they see either of us today.”

“Do you want to know?” Severus asks before Nizar has a chance to dare the pitch. “More about Lily than I’ve already spoken of, I mean.”

Nizar tightens his grip on the broom’s handle. “I don’t know. If I decide yes, it should not be while I’m in the air. I don’t need another brainstorm like I had when Salazar spoke about July.” He hesitates. “You’re merely offering?”

Severus glares at him. “Yes, though if you want to count payment, do recall that you just tried to give me one of the most expensive brooms for sale in the *entire Western hemisphere* merely because you thought I might have need of it one day. I would consider that something beyond paid for.”

“All right,” Nizar agrees, but has no idea what he would even ask. At least it was a gift given without a time limit attached. He releases the mental hold he had on the broom and dips down, allowing it free access to the speed it was built with. He follows the curve of the stadium in a single, eye-watering loop. “Fuck!” he gasps out. He banks sharply to the left without feeling the slightest hitch in the broom and darts through one of the goal posts before he brakes hard in mid-air.

“This broom could fucking kill someone!” he declares, landing on the stands where Severus is waiting for him.

“I said that of the last one,” Severus says.

“Hold this,” Nizar requests, passing over the Firebolt Five before he digs out the older model Firebolt and unshrinks it. “Be right back.”

Nizar makes the same trip around the stadium, though he picks a different banking place and trip through the goal posts, before landing again. “No, I stand by my previous statement.

How does one get the school rules capped for Quidditch so that the base model of Firebolt is as fast as a student's broom is allowed to travel?"

Severus looks surprised. "There is that much of a difference?"

"Severus, I spent most of the first flight trying not to crash into a wall. The second flight was a bit slower, so I had more of a chance to respond to perceived obstacles. I would *not* want to put a student on a Firebolt Five, no matter who they are or how well they fly."

"If I were to try it by myself, there would be no chance in hell at gaining that sort of broom cap," Severus says after thinking it over. "With Minerva's assistance, perhaps..."

"I'll hide the child's Firebolt if you send for her. This thing is available for sale to literally anyone with the gold to buy it."

Severus hands him back the model Five. "You're going to have to stop that at some point, you know. That child was you."

"Not on Hogwarts grounds, I'm not," Nizar retorts.

"That's a valid, acceptable point."

* * * *

If only for paranoia's sake, Severus waits until the original model of Firebolt is shrunk down and put away before retrieving his wand. The last time he cast his Patronus, it had seemed a bit less defined than before. Except for a moment's curiosity, he'd disregarded the incongruity.

This time when he casts the spell, he gets a non-corporeal blob of silver mist. "What the fuck?"

Nizar studies the mist. "Not a common problem?"

Severus glares at him. "No, it is not. I haven't seen that happen since I mastered the spell." He's not willing to tell Nizar why his Patronus has its particular form; he's not certain if he'll ever be ready. Even for a committed relationship, it's information that feels too personal.

"Something makes you happier now than the memory you usually rely on to invoke the spell," Nizar suggests. "That's why it isn't working—possibly because the memory you relied on wasn't the happiest recollection in the first place."

"Fuck!" Severus lowers his wand and grinds his teeth.

Find a different memory. As if that's so blasted easy. What can he possibly—

I love you. I'd rather say it now than never have said it at all.

Never in my life—no one has ever granted me anything like this, Nizar.

You don't have to say it back, you know. I can wait for you to make that decision, Severus.

It isn't about the decision. It's about being able to say the words, and I don't know how.

Then know that I will be here until you can.

Severus swallows and allows himself to feel the joy of that moment, the strength of an emotion once held in check by fear. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

He has no idea what to make of the results. It's reptilian, perhaps the length of a Scottish Highland wildcat from head to tail. It has feathered wings instead of stretched skin over bone, and no legs to speak of.

“A Iaculus!” Nizar looks delighted.

Severus stares at the Patronus, baffled. “A bloody dragon?”

“Not a dragon. Iaculus are more properly in the serpent family.” Nizar smiles and hisses at the Patronus, which loops once in the air before it opens its sharp-fanged mouth to hiss back. “They're Parseltongue-speakers.”

Severus feels too many emotions trying to happen at once, a sensation he despises. Pleasure that he's finally managed something serpentine, closer in representation to the House he loves. Frustration that his Patronus has changed in a way that Order members will most certainly notice. They will wish to *discuss* it, and Severus would rather fling himself into a gorge.

Misery that he's lost the strength of that connection to Lily.

Delight that thoughts of Nizar are stronger than happiness marred by grief.

“I could send her my Patronus, instead,” Nizar offers.

“No. Best to get it over with.” Severus addresses his Patronus: “Minerva, please come out to the Quidditch pitch. Nizar and I have something to discuss with you.”

Minerva arrives in such a hurry that Severus would suspect her of Apparating, but he knows she hasn't yet given in and agreed to be tied to the castle's magic. She brings her wand out of hiding when she sees them and lets out a whooshing breath of relief. “For a moment, I honestly wondered if there were enemies on the grounds.”

“Not today, at least,” Severus replies.

“Such an interesting, and very new Patronus!” Minerva smirks at him. “A European Iaculus, I believe.”

“I did not ask you here to discuss Patroni!” Severus snaps, and then allows Nizar to explain the problem.

Minerva frowns. “That would actually be a first time such has ever been required. Are you certain it’s necessary?”

In answer, Nizar hands her the new Firebolt. “Do *not* try to make the stadium loop within the stadium walls,” he says. “Go up above the stadium and follow the curve of the walls from that perspective.”

Minerva doesn’t look convinced, but she accepts the broom and mounts up for flight. Moments later, there is a vicious streak of Scots Gaelic in the air above them.

Nizar grins. “That was positively filthy.”

Minerva lands, shoves the broom in Nizar’s direction, and then puts her hand to her breast. “Did you make the stadium loop, Nizar?”

“Not knowing any better? Yes. It’s a damned good thing I’m an excellent flier and had the experience to compensate. A student might not be so fortunate.”

Minerva nods her agreement. “Severus, if you’ll return to Hogwarts on the sixth instead of the morning of the seventh, I’ll approach the Headmaster with you. This model of broom truly is a fatality waiting to happen.” She peers up at Severus. “I’m surprised you’re not trying for a ban on all Firebolts.”

Severus rolls his eyes. “Minerva, Potter was injured multiple times on this damned pitch, but not once was it the fault of a broom. The original model of Firebolt is fine; that thing is *not*.”

“Quite.” Minerva reaches up to tuck her hair beneath her hat again. “And how is your holiday proceeding, Nizar?”

“Oddly,” Nizar says. “But that seems to be to standard.”

* * * *

“Oddly?” Severus repeats in amusement, once they’ve Apparated back to London and returned to Salazar’s flat. “Oddly?”

“That seemed like a much better response than all of the alternatives,” Nizar says. “You know, like discussing the Marauder’s Map with itself, my parents, a photo album, a certain broom, Salazar, and oh, yes—scaring the complete hell out of a ballroom full of Death Eaters.”

“You’re right,” Severus admits while shedding his cloak. “That was the wisest response.”

Nizar hangs his cloak by the door, next to the old coat of Salazar's he found for going out into London. "I want to show you something, and it doesn't require leaving the flat."

"Good." Severus has no intention of stepping outside that door again tonight, stubbornness rooted to the point that he is raiding a pile of take-away menus to have food delivered. "What is it?"

"Tea, first. I need to consider my words. I think half the concepts might still be in a language you don't speak." Nizar disappears into the kitchen for ten minutes and comes back with a tea tray balanced on one hand.

Severus waits until his tea has cooled enough to sip from. "Where did you even find tea in that kitchen?"

"Salazar is hiding several varieties behind a tin inside that refrigerator thing. Airtight containers in a cold space." Nizar lowers his cup. "There are things about magical combat that I've forgotten. I don't think it's a large gap in my knowledge, but the fact that the gap exists is dangerous."

"You may still recall all of it," Severus says.

"I might. I might not. Either way, those gaps are slow to fill with what is supposed to be there...so I'm going to compensate with what I *do* recall." Nizar looks at Severus. "Do you know how to introduce your wand to another magic-user? Not for passing it down, but as a contingency measure?"

"You mean for something such as a battle situation," Severus realizes. "If one of us lost a wand but the other's wand was available."

Nizar nods. "Without that introduction, you can cast magic using someone else's wand, but it will never be a powerful spell until both wand and magician adjust to the changed relationship. However, if you've been introduced to that wand already, there is no adjustment period. The wand knows you, and the spells you cast will be of similar strength to what you'd cast with your own wand, if not to your greatest strength."

"You're worried that this will become necessary."

"You just left Voldemort's service after long years where he thought you loyal. You're also not dead. Whether or not he's aware of that fact will become a moot point when you're still alive to begin teaching again on eighth January," Nizar reminds him. "I just went to the trouble of angering or terrifying a lot of Death Eaters. If we weren't walking targets before the twenty-fifth, we sure as hell are now."

"You and your ability to be *reasonable*," Severus mutters. "All right. This introduction. How is it done?"

"It's sort of similar in gesture to an Unbreakable Vow, but without the vowing part," Nizar says. "Hold out your wand, handle first, in your dominant hand." He demonstrates and then holds out his left hand.

Severus gets out his wand, feeling a sudden weight of formality that had been missing seconds ago. He mirrors the gesture, and Nizar clasps Severus's left hand. "The words aren't formal, though I imagine you can sense the magic involved."

Severus's shoulders twitch. "It's...prickly."

"I'm given to understand that the magic of an Unbreakable Vow feels like being stung by a lot of bees all at once." Nizar straightens in place, and while there are no ritual words, his tone and expression are solemn. "Bernier Ollivander crafted this wand and its twin in the year 996, though it wasn't by our request. The wood is cherry, thirteen inches, and has a bit of flex for what is normally an inflexible wood. It's not varnished but for the beeswax I place on it to keep the wood from being damaged."

"With the rumored basilisk horn core, like Salazar's?" Severus asks.

Nizar shakes his head. "It's not a rumor. The family matriarch for the basilisk nest tied to our bloodline presented Salazar with part of her shed horn as a gift, and he was carrying it the day we met Bernier. That shard of horn was split in two; half went to each wand. There is also a single thestral tail hair and a single unicorn tail hair, braided together and tied to the basilisk horn, which is set into the wand's handle."

"Which means what, exactly?"

"Well...cherry is a powerful magical wood, though too often people consider its lethality before they consider power. Those are not the same thing. Any wand can be lethal; that doesn't necessarily make it powerful." Nizar smiles at the expression on Severus's face. "Salazar's first wife, Orellana, was a wood-speaker. I learned quite a bit about the magical properties of wood from her. Anyway," he plows on, before Severus can ask about her, "the basilisk horn is an indication of how important the serpentine is to the bloodline."

"It's commonly mistaken that Casa de Deslizarse means House of Slithering, which, yes, gave rise to Slytherin. The translation is accurate for the verb form, but in a lot of very *old* Castellano, Deslizarse was interchangeable with serpent, as one described the motion far more than one was discerning between various slithering creatures. *Casa de Deslizarse* is the Ancient House of Serpents. That is one of the things carved in Futhorc runes on this wand handle, though the language used is Latin rather than Norse, Danish, or Old English. It also says, *Nizar, Protector est e Hogewáþ, Defender ex Britanni Insulis, Dominus of León et Castellae.*"

"And no mention of being a war mage," Severus notes.

"I think Bernier thought it redundant, given his mentioning the other two titles. Also, only so much room on a wand handle," Nizar replies. "As for the rest—a unicorn is a creature associated with light, innocence, and youth, while a thestral is associated with darkness, wisdom, and death. The braided hairs are meant to balance each other, along with the magic being cast through the wand."

Severus knows Nizar is done with the introduction when the hair on his arms and the back of his neck tries to stand up. "That was so informative that I feel like I have almost nothing to

say in comparison.”

Nizar doesn’t look up from his study of the handle on Severus’s wand. “I’ve more ground to cover.”

“Very well. Unlike most of the residents of Britain, my wand didn’t come from Ollivander’s. For the other small percentage, it didn’t come from Gregorovitch’s London wand shop, either.”

Severus frowns; he hasn’t thought on that journey in a long time. “My mother’s parents were friends with a wandmaker who lived in Norway, in what used to be the old capital of Bergen. When my mother and her parents had their falling-out in regards to my mother’s marriage, Embla Holt refused to take sides and remained my mother’s friend. I use the term loosely, as I’m not sure Eileen Prince ever actually understood the concept of friendship,” Severus adds.

“Embla Holt. *Elm Grove*,” Nizar translates. “Now there is someone destined for their chosen career.”

“When I turned eleven in 1971, my mother didn’t wait until summer. She took me out of school for that entire week, and we went to visit Embla Holt in Norway. It was a fascinating experience for a Half-blood living in an ostensibly Muggle household. I’d never been in a magic home before, and it was nothing like the sly way my mother would cast spells only if my father were out for the day.

“The students in Slytherin House tell me that Ollivander measures them before choosing a wand to try with a child, often with several mishaps before a match is found. Embla Holt—I don’t know what methods she chose. I’m not even certain when she found the time to craft the wand, but on the last day of that visit, she pressed this wand into my hand. Even I knew it was perfect before it cast silver light without my needing to do anything.”

Nizar smiles. “Your family’s magic is silver. Lovely.”

“I wouldn’t know. Until I met you, Nizar, I’ve never seen anyone’s magic burn in their eyes. I wouldn’t have known familial magic existed as anything beyond Pure-blood propaganda.” Severus glances down at his wand and the familiar carvings on its handle. “Matte, black-varnished pine, eleven and three-quarter inches, rigid but not inflexible. Embla Holt told me that the carvings on the hilt were actually words, a form of touch-based reading, but she never confided what they meant.”

Nizar glances up at him. “Do you want to know?”

“You can read it?” Severus asks in surprise.

“The Norse stole a hell of a lot from the Picts, and that included their touch-language for those who couldn’t see. They just happened to make it so the sighted could read it as well, if they chose to learn.”

“Then yes, I want to know.”

“The handle being split into a two-part grip is a deliberate choice, a repetition, as each part of the handle says the same thing. The definition isn’t exact, but essentially it reads life—” Nizar touches the tip of his wand to the marks that are raised up on the top half of the carving — “and death,” he continues, touching the marks that are hollowed out on the bottom. “Fullness, emptiness; possibility, nothingness, light, dark, good, evil. It’s duality, but not necessarily a duality concerning balance. She was calling you two-natured, one who could be one or the other, or both at the same time, and not lose your fucking mind in the process. It denotes a hell of a lot of gifted mental flexibility.”

Severus isn’t certain what to make of it, though it feels...correct. “And the carved knotwork that sits atop all of that?”

“It’s a variant of a shield knot,” Nizar says. “She made your wand unbreakable, possibly knowing even then that it would see combat. What’s the core?”

“That would be the *other* reason my mother refused to visit Ollivander’s. She said he limited himself to too few wand cores. By my childhood, Ollivander was only using unicorn hair and dragon heartstring.”

Nizar looks surprised. “Not phoenix feather?”

“I imagine he’d love to use it, but he’s only ever received two,” Severus answers. “The core of my wand is made of willingly donated sphinx hair.”

Nizar grins. “All of those combined together? An independent, creative magician with a fondness for intelligence, one who likes to present as an enigma to everyone except a chosen few. This wandmaker had you utterly pegged, Severus. Is she still alive? I’d love to meet her.”

“Unfortunately, no. She died in 1990. Possibly of old age, but I don’t know when she was born. She didn’t allow dates to be placed on her grave marker. It’s a pity; every time I saw a Slytherin come into our House with a wand that didn’t quite suit, I made certain they knew to go see Embla Holt over the winter break. I’m not certain if she ever had an apprentice, either.”

Nizar looks disappointed. “Dammit. From what you’re telling me, the wandmaker who limits himself and his magic is the most famous crafter in Britain, while those wandmakers who actually take the time to do their jobs properly are considered substandard.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“What the fuck is wrong with people, seriously?” Nizar asks, scowling. “It’s like King Arthur being married off to his grandniece all over again!”

Severus is startled into laughing. “The only answer I’ve ever devised to either question is that they’re imbeciles. Is there anything else we need to do?”

Nizar releases Severus’s left hand. “Take my wand by the handle—and yes, I’m aware of how that sounds.”

Severus pauses in the midst of reaching out. "I am going to think of that at very inopportune moments, and I'm going to blame you each and every time."

"I'd be so disappointed if you didn't." Nizar grasps Severus's wand handle and then waits until Severus has done the same in reverse. "Now you can let go."

It isn't like picking up someone's fallen wand to hand it back to the owner. This is magic reaching out, familiar while still being the touch of a stranger. The end of the cherrywood wand glows bright silver with a green corona.

"I told you." When Severus looks at him, Nizar is holding up his wand. The black tip is glowing green with a silvery halo. "Dominant family magic color surrounded by the magic of the wand's current owner," he explains of the wands' glow. "Your family's magic is silver."

"And working in tandem, those are Slytherin's House colors," Severus notes, pleased.

Nizar gazes at the magic as its light begins to fade. "A pleasing coincidence."

"Is it?" Severus asks. "Is it really a mere coincidence?"

"I don't know." Nizar gives him back his wand; Severus returns the other. "That is a question you'd ask someone with a mastery in magical Sight."

Into Dust

Chapter Summary

"It sounds like you had an intriguing life."
"I still do."

The only real problem with spending a holiday in London, Nizar realizes, is that he keeps expecting the city to be smaller than it really is. Every time he's certain they must be near its bounds, that there will be a field and emptiness beyond, there is more—more homes, more shops, more buildings devoted to the transportation required to move so many people about. Just...*more*.

Nizar purchases a map, finds Edward Square, and then starts tracing the City of London's official boundaries. That's when he discovers that no one bothered to make a point of marking out where London ended and other towns began. If one is local, one knows which city one is in; if one is not, one is fucked.

He's proud of the fact that Severus nearly started wheezing with laughter when he said that.

"New York City in America had something similar happen as different cities grew and merged together. Unlike London, they were sensible enough to rebuild it over and over again until it was easy to navigate," Severus tells him while Nizar is circling names that used to be tiny villages or mere churches on a hillside.

"Did anyone else do that?" Nizar asks, curious.

"I have also been to Boston to visit the Wizarding area." Severus makes a face like someone turned in an essay worthy of being set afire. "No. No, they did not."

When they go out, Severus is insistent that they view one building in particular. "That entire building is a shop. A clothing shop," Nizar says, hoping Severus will say no.

"The entire thing. Every floor."

"It's bigger than the cathedral down the street!" Nizar shouts, his voice still almost lost to the noise of the city.

"Probably," Severus agrees mildly. Nizar can tell Severus is enjoying this; he's putting too much effort into not smiling.

"How the hell do you find anything in that?" Nizar asks.

"It's arranged by individual department."

Nizar looks at the massive building again. “I am not going in there, and there is nothing—absolutely *nothing*—you can do or say that will change my mind.”

“Oh, thank God,” Severus replies in obvious relief. “I didn’t want to go into that place, either.”

“Then aside from fucking with me, why did you show me that building?”

Severus tilts his head. “Some people like to have options.”

Nizar points at the gigantic clothing shop. “Not that many!” he declares. Severus lowers his head and uses his hair to hide his face so he can laugh.

Severus is kind enough to show him shops after the massive horror that are smaller, simpler, and don’t require a map to navigate the interior. Nizar just doesn’t know what to do about any option presented.

“I know why you’re doing this, because Salazar raised a valid point,” Nizar says in frustration. He’s trying to drink a cup of hot sugary chocolate that is supposed to be coffee, but he doesn’t believe it; it doesn’t taste like compost. “Everything I own is a millennium out of date. But Severus, the clothes the students wear? I don’t know if those are strictly for children, or if they’re for anyone. I know enough to be aware of the fact that magical fashion is two to three *centuries* out of date, but that isn’t helpful out here. I’ve looked at people on this street, and...”

“And they’ve likely not been of assistance,” Severus finishes.

“No.” Nizar scowls. “All I’ve learned from watching people on the street is that people in this decade will wear anything. Not that such is necessarily bad, but if there is a dominant fashion trend? I can’t bloody well find it.”

Severus finally takes pity on him, perhaps because Nizar willingly drank the not-coffee just to cope with the confusion. “There really isn’t one. I feel truly odd explaining this, because I am *not* fashionable or even fashionably inclined, but I’ve spent too much time around those who do rely on changing tastes not to be aware.”

“Just please make this shit make sense,” Nizar requests, and then feels his mouth twist up. He’s discovered sweetened sludge in the bottom of this paper cup, and he is now done with not-coffee.

“I can’t promise that, as it doesn’t,” Severus responds dryly. “Fashion might well be an organic entity at this point. The world is interconnected; London is a global cultural hub that would make Ancient Rome seem rural and uncivilized. There are clothing types from the last five decades from all over the world mingled together and used interchangeably. If you are *not* following trends—and I don’t advise it, it’s like trying to keep up with the weather—then the best thing to do is find something you don’t despise and stick with it.”

“Basically, give up,” Nizar says, and Severus bites back another smile.

“Buy a t-shirt and denims, and your brother would probably be thrilled,” Severus suggests.

“He might, but even I know how casual that is. I’d need at least one other set of garments. It used to be part of my skillset to know what to wear and when, depending on where we were on the island and the current political climate in Britain.”

“Outside of magical circles, that doesn’t necessarily apply.”

Nizar eyes him. “You really don’t know what being a war mage means, do you?”

Severus gives him a flat stare in response. “I do not. It isn’t something that is even taught. Narcissa had to tell me that there was only *one* of you.”

“Well, yes, but there has been only one British war mage since King Arthur’s final battle at Hadrian’s Wall in 532. Only one, when there were once several hundred across the whole of Britain. They all died in that battle except for a righteous arsehole of a magician named Myrddin,” Nizar says.

“All of them?” Severus asks in surprise.

“They were targeted. The invading enemy of that time knew who would be the most dangerous.” Nizar glances up at a store which has an utterly unpretentious name in simple print over the doorway. “In countries with titled nobility, a war mage is of equal rank with a Marqués in peacetime. If war has been declared, war mages immediately become equal in rank to the non-magical war leader of the country, and who is that?”

“In Britain, that would be the Queen.” Severus’s expression is a complicated blend of fascination and distaste. “How often did that become necessary?”

“It was Europe at the beginning of the eleventh century. What do you think?”

“That sounds...very annoying, actually,” Severus grants him, following Nizar into the shop.

“It kept interrupting my time with my students. Annoying is not the term I used.”

“I imagine not.” Severus sounds amused. “What about Spain?”

Nizar glances around the shop. Clean, pale wood floors, neat merchandise, most of it not offensive to his eyes in the slightest, and a clean smell in the air instead of false perfumes. He likes it already. “León solved the perceived difficulty of too many holding a king’s rank by declaring a single magical standard-bearer instead. They had one titled war mage who then acted as a commander to all of the others capable of magical defence. Politics.”

“Excuse me.” Nizar turns around to see a shop keep approaching. Not the owner; apparently even small shops require more than one assistant. The look on this man’s face is far too sour for someone who is barely twenty. “I’m not so sure your kind should be in here.”

Nizar glances at Severus, who rolls his eyes. Intriguing reaction, but not exactly informative. “I beg your pardon; what kind is that?” Nizar asks.

“You know.” The blond-haired man lowers his voice, as if he’s about to say a dirty word. “Queer.”

Nizar grins wide. “Oh, you’re a bigot!” he says, making his voice too loud for the small shop so it will carry. “How entirely quaint!”

The blond twit flushes a dull red. “I’m not—”

“Is there a problem here?”

Now that one is the owner, or manager, or whatever the bloody term is. She’s dark-skinned and dark-eyed with deep red, curling hair. She’s wearing a simple black shirt tucked into trousers whose legs are wide enough to flare like a skirt as she walks. Command emanates from every move she makes.

Nizar gives her his best charming smile, the one he reserves for people he likes instead of ones he would prefer to kill. “No, not at all. Your employee here was just informing me how much your store does not want my custom.”

“Oh. I see.” She eyes the blond, who has turned stark white. “And why is that?”

“He’s old-fashioned. He doesn’t seem to appreciate...what did he call us?” Nizar asks Severus, giving the man an innocent smile.

Severus looks like he can’t decide upon killing Nizar, or if he’s enjoying the opportunity to see someone effectively verbally slaughtered. “I do believe the term he used was ‘queer’ when he said we didn’t belong in this establishment.”

The senior shop keep rolls her eyes. “John. I told you that the third time would be the last time.”

“But it’s not true!” John bursts out. “They’re lying—”

“That’s what you said when you were caught by my morning manager trying to escort black customers from the building before you’d had the chance to formally meet *me*. Your boss. The owner of this store.” She gives John an unimpressed stare. “I decided I’d give you the same chances I give all my employees, and you’ve botched every opportunity. Please remove your belongings from my store and fuck off.”

“This was his third job in three bloody months,” the shop keep mutters under her breath as John slinks off towards the rear of the shop. “The daft stupid sod.” She turns back to Nizar and Severus. “I’m so terribly sorry for that unpleasantness. I hope you will give my establishment another chance.”

“I found it highly entertaining,” Severus says with a polite expression that isn’t quite a smile. Not murder after all, then.

“I’m Bernice.” She holds out her hand; her fingernails are painted the same color as her hair, but the red glitters in the light like Kanza’s scales. Nizar clasps her hand after Severus does so. “How might I help you today?”

“Help is so very much the correct word. You see, the accent might suggest otherwise, but I’ve not been local in a very long time. I’ve lived in a place where clothing was...well, quite different,” Nizar finally hedges. “Let me put it this way: this coat is borrowed.”

Bernice grins. “Considering that coat doesn’t match the fine tailoring of those trousers, I gathered as much. How can I assist you, then?”

“There are too many types of clothes in this city, and I really have no idea where to even begin with wearing something that no one would consider odd to see on the street.” Nizar finds himself wishing that Helga were here. She’d have figured out the entire modern fashion disaster of London within fifteen minutes’ observation. “At the very least, I need one outfit that means no one will notice me, and one outfit that is literally fine enough to meet royalty in.”

“Dear, I have terrible news for you—you are fit, and no one is ever going to *not* notice you,” Bernice says in a frank, fond voice. “So is your boyfriend.”

The expression on Severus’s face is an absolute treasure. “What?”

“Fit,” Bernice repeats, shaking her head. “Whoever told you otherwise is blind.”

“Bless you.” Nizar wants to hug the woman. “I’ve been trying to convince him otherwise for a long time.”

“Sometimes it helps to have an unbiased opinion,” Bernice says primly. “Now, then. Let’s see what I have that you do not despise the sight of, shall we?”

“Absolutely,” Nizar agrees. “No bright colors, though. I have tetrachromacy, and sometimes I find them overwhelming.”

“Oh! I’ve just recently heard about that. It sounded bloody fascinating,” Bernice says. “And were you being serious about that ‘meeting royalty’ comment?”

“He’s nobility,” Severus puts in, giving Nizar a smile that is all teeth.

Nizar sighs. “Please don’t tell people that!”

Bernice looks at Severus with a bright-eyed smile. “You do realize, then, that if your boyfriend is meeting royalty, you will quite likely be required to accompany him.”

Severus’s grin drops into a look of utter distaste. “Fuck,” he says, and Bernice laughs.

“Now, would this be the sort of meeting nobility that requires black tie, or simply a striking appearance?” Bernice asks, suddenly the consummate professional when it comes to dressing others. Nizar truly likes her, and if she were here, Helga would be flirting with Bernice and attempting to convince her to take up residence in Hogwarts—preferably in Hegla’s own quarters.

Nizar glances at Severus, who gives him a minute shake of his head. “Not black tie. Striking will have to do.” He hopes he’ll like whatever is appropriate; one of his roles as *Britanni*

Bellum dux Magum involves actually meeting with the royalty on the throne.

He *really* hopes he isn't going to be the Queen's first magician. That's usually awkward.

They escape after two hours in Bernice's company. Nizar is pleased with the "streetwear" Bernice found for him, and the clothing she declared fitting for royalty isn't much different from magical formal dress as long as the magician is dressing for the correct century. The purchases also use up most of the pound notes he took from Gringotts, but it will be worth it if only so Salazar will leave him the hell alone.

"That woman is absolutely terrifying," Nizar says as they duck into an alleyway to shrink down their bags. "I like her."

Severus glares at him as he pockets a shrunken, single bag. "That was meant to be torture for you. Why did *I* end up with clothing suited for Muggle royalty?"

"Because it was flattering on you, will work just as well in the magical world, and I bought it, so there." Nizar smiles when Severus's glower intensifies. "The shirt will match with the robe I gave you nicely, too."

"It is *purple*." Severus sounds offended. "I look loathsome in purple!"

"It's a very dark shade of violet, and no, you don't." Nizar shakes his head while Severus swears under his breath. "You now have a hint of what sort of torture it would be like to shop with Helga, though. Bernice was rather sedate in comparison."

"I never wanted to contemplate being forced to endure shopping with an actual Viking, so thank you so very much for that." Severus steps back out of the alley. "Now what?"

"Since that's over and done with? I have no idea. Pick something?"

Severus decides on dinner, which Nizar feels is an excellent plan. The food is from a country named Thailand, and from a map on the wall, Nizar can tell that Thailand was once Siam. Given the language he hears, the presentation of the meal, and the décor, Nizar decides that the East has done a much better job of holding onto its ancient heritage than the West. The food is an excellent reminder of times he'd been happy. Even if Siam eventually developed their own palate and flavors, a lot of the basic elements of a meal in the East are still present.

"Were you there?" Severus asks him, after casting a privacy charm to mask their conversation.

"I never visited Siam, no. The land was fought over often enough that it just didn't seem worth the risk. I did take the Old Road all the way to the eastern edge where land met ocean. Following in the footsteps of Alexander." Nizar smiles. "Even if you could cheat and Apparate, it still took days to make the journey. Our families traveled the road an average of once every two years after Salazar and Marion were married. Her family comprised one of the trading caravans, so the habit was already set."

"It sounds like you had an intriguing life," Severus comments in a neutral tone.

“I still do.” Nizar wants to mention something—to say how much he wants to spend it with Severus, to show him those same places—but he doesn’t quite dare. “Elfric bought the rug in my quarters from an incredible magical weaver during one of those trips. Spent every bit of money he’d saved up on that one gift because he heard me say I liked it. He was such a kind-hearted child—dammit, I keep stumbling over depressing topics.”

Severus reaches out and clasps his hand. He doesn’t say anything to Nizar, no offered words of sympathy, but that isn’t necessary. It’s all spoken of in his dark eyes, and Nizar can feel it in the grip of Severus’s hand.

“I’ll pay you back,” Nizar says after they leave the restaurant. He glances up at the lights on the buildings above. There is enough moisture in the air that each individual light has a brilliant rainbow halo, turning the sky into a glaze of colors.

“Why?” Severus glances at him. “Am I not allowed to spend money on you?”

Nizar frowns. “Is this a trick question?”

“No. You’re used to different customs. I am used to today’s customs, where I can choose whether or not to indulge the man I’m dating.”

“Oh. I just insulted you, didn’t I?” Nizar grimaces. “Right back to the awkward conversation about money. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t take it personally.” Severus glances at him. “I allowed you to buy me that hideous shirt, after all.”

“It isn’t hideous!”

Nizar waits until they get home before he convinces Severus to put the “hideous” violet button-down shirt back on. Then he slides the black-dyed robe with its deep violet highlights in the weave onto Severus’s shoulders. “Well?”

Severus gives the long mirror in the bedroom a critical look. “All right. It isn’t hideous.”

Nizar rolls his eyes over Severus’s faint praise. “I have good taste. Helga and Salazar might have had to beat it into me, and Court reinforced the beatings, but dammit, I do have it.”

Severus removes the robe and puts on the jacket that Bernice chose. It’s cut long, to mid-thigh, and isn’t quite black, though Nizar supposes it would be to normal vision. What he sees is a blue-violet dye that drenched the silken fabric until it became the color of the night sky.

Nizar smiles at Severus when he buttons the coat halfway up and leaves the rest undone, as Bernice suggested. “I told you—clothing fits on you like it’s grateful for the fucking privilege.”

Severus doesn’t reply, but he does give the coat and shirt a more careful examination. Nizar suspects that maybe the stubborn bastard is beginning to believe him.

* * * *

Almost everywhere they go in London, even on New Year's Eve, Nizar can find people playing music for money on street corners. Some of them have instruments that are familiar, though in many cases, electricity has been added to amplify sound. Most of the musicians are incredibly talented—and ignored, to Nizar's frustration. Music deserves more appreciation than he's seeing it receive; some of these musicians look as if they've not been hired for anything in months.

One of them in particular stops him in his tracks as haunting sound fills the air. The musician is holding a single strip of wood propped under her chin with four strings made from metal stretched across. The instrument looks like a sitar with the resonating body missing, and it's hooked into one of the speaker units that Severus has dubbed an amplifier.

"What is that?"

"An electric violin," Severus answers. "They're gaining popularity, though I do not often see them in person."

Nizar smiles. "I want one, and I'm terrible with anything involving strings."

Severus glances at him. "Oh?"

"Salazar is excellent on an oud, or really any sort of lute. The alboka and the botet, too, but that's because he grew up with them." Nizar is enjoying the feel of that electric violin's intense sound thrumming in his breastbone. "I always did better with reeds."

"Like your former alboka," Severus says.

Nizar nods and sighs. "Stupid damned temper. The chances of finding another one like it are not high."

Severus nudges them along when the female musician finishes her set. "I'm indulging in the urge to pry. I know Christianity was in the Highland region a thousand years ago."

"It was, but..." Nizar frowns. "Christianity in the isles at that time was 'Join us or die' or 'Join us and suffer.' I wasn't fond of either option. There were still holdouts from the older religions who thought those were stupid ideas, and Mari and Sugaar from the *Euskaldunak* are at least interesting."

"And that would be the other curiosity: Basques who do not speak the language," Severus says.

"We did both speak Euskaran. I don't know about Salazar, but I can't remember it. It's not exactly common in Britain. As for *Castellano*, Castilian was historically a hell of a lot more stable than fucking English."

There is also music played electronically by other means aside from the crank-turned and magic-fueled gramophones in Hogwarts. Vinyl records used to be more plentiful in the Common Room, but Severus points out that they were replaced by plastic cases filled with magnetic tape that hold recorded sound, played by a different means other than a needle. Nizar thinks that is a huge step backwards and says so.

Severus smiles and introduces him to compact records, which are not played by needle, but read by light. A laser. Now Nizar understands a few of the jokes the Muggle-borns were telling a bit better. He also spends ten minutes watching the shifting colors on the backside of the silvery disk. He could paint those shades, and still no one would ever be able to see them.

The store has been playing music the entire time he's been staring at the back of the compact record. Some of it has been enjoyable; some of it has been noise that he probably doesn't have enough cultural backing in this century to understand.

One song, however, makes him forget all about the spectrum of color on silvered plastic. The emotion that accompanies familiarity isn't like the startled terror from remembering something that should have been utterly forgotten. Instead, he feels a vague sense of being lost.

*“Still falling
Breathless and on again
Inside today
Beside me today
Around, broken in two
Till your eyes shed
Into dust.”*

“It's a good song, right, mate?” one of the young shop keeps asks him, a girl who can't be older than seventeen. “Came out about two years ago in the States. We imported it not long after, I think, but it was a bit before my time. I'm just now getting into Mazzy Star.”

“Do you have that on a record—LP? Vinyl?” Nizar asks, trying to find the right term. For all he knows, all three are correct.

She purses her dark red-painted lips and frowns. “Might have to check on that one. Back in a few. Don't go anywhere!”

Nizar is so distracted by trying to track down whatever memory is attached to the song that he doesn't even realize he's murmuring the lyrics under his breath until Severus asks him about it. “I don't know,” he replies in complete honesty. “It's certainly not tied to anything in 1981. This song is supposed to be from 1993.”

“Here ya go, love,” the girl says, returning with the album covered in clear wrapping. “Ring you up if you're ready to go?”

“Sure,” Nizar replies distractedly. If it weren't for the paper slip of a receipt, he wouldn't even know what he paid for it, or that he got back the right amount of change in those odd paper British notes.

When they get back to the flat, Nizar makes Severus oversee his use of the turntable to make certain he's learned to use it correctly. Then he sits and listens through the entire album without moving for fifty-two minutes.

"Anything enlightening?" Severus asks, coming back to the parlor with a quill and his few remaining essays to grade.

Nizar shakes his head. "That one song, 'Into Dust' is familiar, but the rest? I think I like the album, but the other songs are all new."

"You might perhaps have heard that particular song on the Muggle radio," Severus says while unrolling a scroll. "Oh, God, it's Granger."

Nizar grins. "She's impressive, isn't she?"

Severus scowls in response. "What did she do to you?"

"She wrote twenty-four feet on Defence, and it was the best among my fifth-years. She's highly intelligent, but still a bit wand-leery about offence for defensive purposes. Give her a complicated spell or logic, though, and she's damned good," Nizar says. "You?"

"She's going to be in my N.E.W.T. Potions without difficulty." Severus frowns over the essay. "I'd just like to be able to encourage her instead of being in the position of forced castigation."

"Severus." Nizar waits for Severus to look up at him. "Why would you still be in that position?"

Severus gives him a blank look before he swears viciously. "I *still* don't know what the fuck to tell Albus!"

"Well, it's only the first of January. Plenty of time left to figure it out," Nizar says. "Just think, though: you'll get to be the sort of Head of House you *want* to be instead of what circumstances required of you."

Severus ducks his head. "I'm not sure I'll know where to begin."

"Plenty of time to figure that out, too. Do you mind if I replay this album?" Nizar asks. "I'd like to hear it again."

Severus's quill is already marking up Granger's essay. "I don't mind. They sort of remind me of Jefferson Airplane. Salazar has one of their albums in the cabinet; you should try it later."

"I'll do that, thanks." Nizar leans back in the armchair. Between the largely quiet nature of the album and the comforting sound of quill on paper, it lulls him into sleep.

For the first time, he dreams of something that happened before the magical adoption changed his identity. It has to be tied to the song, but he isn't sure how; there is no music playing in that cemetery. There is only green light as someone dies. Blood spilt that burns as

it's taken. Then that fucking walking corpse rises up from one of the great cauldrons that Myrddin preferred to brew in when he was in the mood.

Something is wrong. Nizar knows this spell. He isn't a necromancer, but Elfric *was*, and his youngest son had never minded sharing his knowledge.

Voldemort should have emerged from that cauldron appearing fully human. He wouldn't have been healthy, not at all, but there should have been human eyes, a true nose, and the hair left to him at that age. What emerged was human only in frame and its bipedal nature.

Why? Why did Blood-and-Bone fail? Nizar knows it was done correctly. He might be remembering it through the child's eyes, but he's witnessing the ritual with an adult's knowledge.

What is he overlooking?

Nizar jerks awake to Severus's hand on his shoulder, a frown line between Severus's eyes. "You were dreaming."

Nizar nods. "I was. Sorry, did I disturb you?"

"Only by concerning me. You were speaking in your sleep. Parseltongue," Severus says.

Parseltongue. Inhuman. Magical sundering.

There wasn't enough *left* of Voldemort to allow Blood-and-Bone to do its work properly.

Nizar stares at Severus, horrified and chilled to his bones. "Severus: there are more than four Horcruxes."

Works inspired by this one

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[Of a Linear Circle - Part II \[Podfic\]](#) by [tehren](#)

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