

The Artist

Master, asks the prentice, how is a portrait made?

The Master does not answer immediately, and when he does, it is not the answer the prentice wants.

Pigment is mixed with animal fat, or oil; applied to a board or canvas by brush, he says. In true fresco, pigment is applied to wet plaster and the limewater binds it securely; in false fresco, the limewater is mixed with the pigment and then applied to dried plaster, but this does not –

That is not what I meant, Master, the prentice says, only after having ascertained that he is being teased, and will not be punished for interrupting his teacher. I meant...those portraits.

The Master looks up at the portraits on the wall, the ones which move and speak, and shakes his head.

All my secrets imparted in a day? he asks.

I don't understand.

There are few who have a true talent for painting a portrait which captures the life of the subject, child, and few who likewise acquire the knack, he replies.

Do I have the talent?

You may. It remains to be seen. Godric! the Master calls.

The prentice's green eyes snap with curiosity. But how will I know?

You will not. I will, the Master answers, as another youth, the prentice's age or perhaps a little older, appears at the door. He has no interest in painting, and so in the great sprawling castle complex of their lord's lands, where the Master is pleased to be court artist and where the prentice has moved to study under him, Godric studies arms instead.

Yes, father? the Master's son answers.

Tell the mistress her miniature awaits, the Master says, gesturing to a small, coin-shaped chip of ivory, in the prentice's deft fingers. It is not a glorious likeness, but it is not unlike her.

The prentice bends to another task, now that the miniature is done, and thinks one day, he will paint his Master's moving portrait, and show his Master that he has as much talent as any artist in the island.

It wasn't often anymore that Remus was left alone with Sirius. Well, technically it wasn't often ever that Remus was left alone with Sirius, but now he took an active part in ensuring this was so. Sirius quite possibly did not notice; he was the smartest wizard in his year barring James Potter, but he wasn't much on social relationships. Smart did not always equal sensible.

Sirius tried to get alone with Remus. If only to stop James and Peter noticing his consistent and constant appreciation of one of his best friends. It was embarrassing, being caught staring at Remus' lip, the way his hair fell over his eyes, the shape of his ear. His ear, for god's sake.

Remus never noticed, Remus was always buried in a book. James noticed, but let it slide because if he brought it up Sirius teased him mercilessly about Lily.

Remus wasn't comfortable alone with Sirius. Or James. Even in sixth year, with the summer to smooth things over, the near-death of Severus Snape was a sore spot. Peter spent a lot of time as chaperone. He didn't seem to mind.

It wasn't that he didn't like Sirius or James, they were his mates, he'd have died for them and they for him. It was just that...it was all well and good to die for someone but holding a conversation with them was an entirely different matter.

Even Peter, however, had a social life, and he was out with a Slytherin girl (how did that happen? They never asked him, though they asked each other) and James was doing something Quidditch-team related – probably drinking – the night Sirius Black leaned over Remus' homework,

blotting out the light, and announced that they were going Cartographing.

It was a favourite activity of Sirius', ever since they'd started writing the Marauder's Map. Remus, with his anal-retentive grasp of the English language, wondered which exactly of the four was the Marauder mentioned, but never voiced his curiosity out loud. Sirius liked to try locked doors and unexplored corridors, and Remus, who had a soft spot in his heart for abandoned classrooms, never said no.

"What're we up to this time?" he asked, closing his book, as game as any of them for a little adventure. Or at least pretending to be; with Remus the dissembler, one never knew.

"East tower," Sirius replied. There were a lot of locked doors in the east tower. Sirius liked locked doors.

Remus sighed. "Fine. Moony and Padfoot go marauding. Let me gather my wits."

It is quite clear why Godric Gryffindor chose the lion as his symbol.

They all chose animals which resembled them – Salazar gave Helga hers, as she was indifferent, and he said good-naturedly that she badgered him too often.

Rowena's choice of a bird, even an eagle, was doubly obvious. She has keen eyes, she likes shining things: Godric once gave her a piece of mother-of-pearl which she will sometimes contemplate for hours, using it as a divining tool. Second, well, her nose is...somewhat beaklike. Indeed, she will pass this misfortune on to her descendents, and although the laws of genetics are against it, if you were to put Severus Snape up next to a picture of Rowena Ravenclaw, you would have little doubt as to which old magical house his family hailed from.

Salazar, with his dark green, glittering eyes and black hair over pale skin, speaks parseltongue, and is like a snake in his movements; it was hardly a surprise there, either.

Godric's leonine mane of curly brown hair, his amber eyes and deeply tanned skin, all speak of big cats, graceful but gangling predators.

Why am I here, Salazar? he asks.

An excellent question, Salazar replies, stirring oil into the pigments with the end of a home-made brush. They are made with his own hair, which is fine, more like a child's than a proper adult's, and good for detailed painting. Shall we debate it? he continues.

I do not mean in the general sense, man, but rather in this particular place at this particular time.

Ah. Destiny? A combination of God's will and my caprice, Salazar answers. And since I do not believe in God I will have to declare that it is mainly my caprice.

Godric, sitting in the bend where a tree-limb meets the trunk, looks across at his friend, who is...well, to say coiled would be to overuse the pun, but it does seem to be the case...on another branch. One long leg dangles off the branch, while the other is pulled up against his chest; a prepared board floats in front of him, his paintbox off to one side.

Cats like trees. Proven fact, Salazar announces. If you are going to be the Lion of the Isle you must pose the part.

And how will you paint yourself? Godric asks.

Find a pose, please, and do not move except to speak, Salazar replies. He is arrogant, Salazar Slytherin is, and still seems much younger than any of the others, though he is Godric's age. Godric finds a comfortable position on the tree, though the bark digs somewhat irksomely into his hips, and turns to rest his head against the trunk. Salazar squints.

That will do, he announces, and begins to splash yellow and green paint onto the board.

You didn't answer my question, Godric says.

I am not here to answer your questions, my dear Godric, Salazar answers. If I am to paint a proper portrait that moves and thinks and speaks as you do, you must answer mine. I am the artist, not the art.

Godric, looking through lazy, animal brown eyes at his friend, wonders if this is actually the case.

One would have thought that Sirius would lead the way, bold bastard that he was.

Remus reflected that Sirius was brave enough in front of other people, but when it came to actual 'Hey, we're in the dark, isn't this wicked' bravery, Sirius preferred to follow.

Remus was oblivious in many ways, not the least of which was Sirius' appreciation of Remus. Sirius wasn't particularly a coward, it was just that Remus hadn't bought new trousers this year and the ones he had on were just snug enough that following him afforded a really fabulous view.

He held the candelabra up to the door at the top of the tower. It was Sirius' idea to start at the top and work their way down, mapping as they went; all they had to do was walk into the room and the incomplete but efficient Marauder's Map would do the rest. It would identify hidden doors, thanks to some ingenious charmwork by James. It would draw out furniture, thanks to Sirius. But the best of all, once it was finished, a laborious spell by Remus would identify who was in the room.

Remus bent to peer through a keyhole. "I think this is a textbook-storage room," he announced.

"Mh?" Sirius asked. Remus glanced at him.

"Are you sure you're not coming down with something?" he inquired. "Only you're all red."

"M'fine," Sirius scoffed.

He paints Rowena in bed. In a nest, aha, of blankets.

It takes much longer than painting Godric did. For one thing, she is restless, and will not stay still for long; for another, she is beautiful, and if Salazar smears shining paint across her breasts she moans and then the paints dry out while the artist is distracted.

He is not particularly enamoured of her, but this thing she offers him is an intricate part of Rowena's existence, and the painting would be incomplete without it.

When it is finished he hangs it next to Godric's in the great hall; mostly, she fidgets and smiles while sitting on top of the messy bed, with the wide window behind her covered in autumn foliage, her blue dress a pale contrast to the deepening twilight outside. Sometimes she turns and the children think to themselves that she really is a bird, she wants to fly away.

Rarely, she smiles a seductive sort of smile that makes the older boys feel they ought to be taking more tutoring from Mistress Ravenclaw. It makes Godric wonder, but Salazar's affairs are, after all, his own.

"This looks promising," Remus remarked, as the candle-light illuminated a door with heavy locks and hinges.

Sirius eyed it warily. "Place like that's got to have some serious curses on it," he observed.

"Cursebreaker Black to the rescue?" Remus asked mildly. Remus had a habit of teasing Sirius about his one true dream of being a Cursebreaker. Admittedly, Sirius found his own ambitions amusing.

"This isn't any old alohomora," Sirius answered.

"Go to, then," Remus replied, stepping back. Sirius rolled up his sleeves and waggled his wand.

"Stop showing off," Remus laughed.

"I'm not showing off, this is what they do. It's um...showmanship," Sirius bluffed. He hated it when Remus called him on his bravado. "Right, now you're going to see some cursebreaking," he continued.

He wasn't untalented at it, whatever crazy Moony might think. He could feel the curses under his skin, and it was just a matter of identifying them. Sirius was good at identifying things and putting them in their place; it was part of his cleverness.

He'd spent months trying to identify one particular feeling -- an entire summer -- before he realised that it wasn't a hex or a charm.

It was loneliness.

At first he'd thought it was ridiculous, James was around at least once a week and there were girls coming over all the time, as Sirius had a townhouse in London and access to some really brilliant Dark Arts books. Then he realised what he was really lonely for was their werewolf.

(Remus had been Their Werewolf ever since they'd discovered his secret; they cared for him, protected him, became Animagi for him. They also loved him fiercely, and did not suffer anyone to insult him, attack him, or turn him down for a date.)

Remus was unaware of this, of course; he would have taken a dim view of being owned by anyone, especially Sirius Black.

"The door?" the brown-haired boy prompted. "While we're young?"

Helga insisted on being painted at the water's edge, and who is Salazar to stop her? Merely the artist, not the art.

She wants a formal pose, and Salazar agrees this is appropriate. She doesn't like to talk to him while she poses, but she answers his questions graciously, and finds herself, after a while, warming to him. He is much more pleasant when he is painting, she tells herself.

And that is all there is to say about Helga. Her painting is very pretty and holds very still. Helga likes it immensely.

Sirius sighed and returned his attention to the many curses on the door. Some were new; some were older, but he could feel that none were so old as the actual door itself, and what was behind it. Whoever had last inhabited this room hadn't minded people coming in; someone later had decided it was worth protecting. The older spells were decaying, some already gone, which was a mercy. Even Sirius Black couldn't battle Old Magic like that.

He was aware of Remus watching him, and drew on the other boy's magic for help in breaking the newer defences on the door. He and James both did this, sometimes; they learned how in fifth year, and he only felt guilty when Remus would wake the next morning looking drawn and pale. They'd steal more often from Peter, but Peter didn't have all that much magic to begin with, and Remus seemed to exude it.

He'd seen bolts slide back before, of course, and there was a magical equivalent that he felt, as one by one the curses retired against his onslaught. He was good at this. He knew that. Remus knew he was good at this, too.

"Ha!" he shouted, when the last bolt slid back. He turned to Remus, and realised he'd taken too much; the other boy looked weary. Still, he shot Sirius a grin, and flicked his hair out of his eyes.

"Let's see it then," Remus said, and put his palms flat on the door, pushing it open.

Starlight spilled into the room, and there was a chill in the air. The space was almost as large as the tower's diameter. The windows were all shut tight, but they'd leaked; Sirius could fill the night air creeping in.

Remus leaned over his shoulder as they stood in the doorway, breath hot on his skin.

"What is it?" he asked, voice rich with wonder. In his hands, Sirius knew the Marauder's Map was laying out every inch of the room.

"It looks like a workshop," Sirius replied, stepping inside. His shoes rang on the stone floor. Remus followed, quieter, lighting his own wand with a whispered 'lumos' so that he could examine the walls.

It was worth it, Sirius decided; every inch of them was hung with paintings and drawings, each with exquisite expression and artistry of a trained and talented artist. He could feel magic heavy in the room; preservation spells, protection spells, charms to prevent theft -- stronger than the decaying ones on the door. They were probably taking a risk walking around in here, but yes...it was still worth it.

"The Founders," Remus murmured, illuminating a set of four wooden panels on one wall. "Look."

Sirius bent over his shoulder, reading the almost foreign inscriptions on the wood. "Thyse oncet hanget en thee Gryte All," he managed.

"These once hung in the Great Hall," Remus translated. They both started when one of the portraits spoke, saying something in a language neither could comprehend.

"It was that one," Sirius said. His hand brushed Remus' elbow as he raised it, indicating the singular, monochromatic portrait that was in such contrast to the vivid, magically-preserved colours of the other three.

But how are you going to paint yourself? Godric asks him, when the three portraits are revealed. Salazar taps a paint-stained finger on his lips.

There has never been a portraitist who has known himself so well that he could paint his own likeness magically, he says, quietly. All the cruel thoughts we think of others, as well as the good, must be aimed at ourselves.

Godric regards his own portrait, which swings a leg lazily, and smiles out of the frame.

Did you think so very many cruel thoughts about me? he asks.

Salazar shakes his head. You don't ask a painting why its leaves are green, he says.

There were few comments from the other portraits; Sirius had the feeling they were so unused to seeing humans in this place that they were at a loss as to what to say.

The whole room bespoke of some sort of preservation, like a museum lovingly but long-since abandoned. There was a wooden stand which, if the spells on the door were anything to go by, should have rotted away centuries ago; there was a square of dust next to it, where obviously something had been removed right before the preservation had been cast. He wondered if their entrance had broken it, or if this room would stay frozen in time forever.

"How long do you reckon it's been like this?" Remus asked, voicing Sirius' thoughts in low tones.

"A long bloody time, Moony," Sirius answered. There were two chairs against one wall, a stack of polished, thin wood against another, and...

He frowned. There was a brocade-blanketed bed, under the windows, larger than their four-posters. Green and gold gleamed out at them, as if this had been made yesterday, and not...

"Sirius, have a look," Remus urged, standing in front of a painting. "You're not going to believe this."

Sirius crossed the few feet of space, peering at what Remus was pointing at. The painting was pleasant enough, a still-life of a forest scene, complete with a stag drinking from a brook.

Remus, however, was bent over the signature.

"Is it just me," he whispered, "or does that read -- "

"Salazar Slytherin," Sirius finished. Even in the Old English, it was unmistakable.

"This was some kind of..."

"...workshop," Sirius agreed.

Remus turned to him, so suddenly that Sirius tensed. He'd been leaning over his shoulder, staring at the inscription, and now he found himself leaning over Moony, staring at him.

"Maybe we shouldn't be here," Remus said quietly. "This place is old, Sirius, old magic, old paintings -- "

There was a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision, and Sirius looked away from Moony's face, up to the only plain drawing in the room.

There had been a clever, black-haired, dark-eyed face there; now where one man had stood, two stood, staring at each other.

Did you think you could know yourself before now? said a voice in his head.

Moony hadn't followed his gaze; the dark brown eyes were still on his face, examining, taking in detail, flicking back and forth from jaw to eye to brow to lips...

"Did you know," Moony said suddenly, "Every time you steal I feel it?"

Sirius dropped his jaw.

"I have for a few weeks, anyhow. I don't mind," he continued, shrugging. "It's a bit like borrowing a shirt, it's not like I don't get it back. But you should know I feel it. And you should ask first."

This was possibly worse than the prank last year, possibly worse than anything previous to that moment, because Sirius had been taking for close to a year and if Moony knew --

"I gave it up willingly. To you, anyway," Moony said. "But I'm tired now. You took too much tonight."

"Moony, I'm so sorry -- "

Remus slumped against him, suddenly, and Sirius' arms rose to catch him, around his waist.

"Remus, I can give some back -- "

"No," Remus muttered, into his chest, as Sirius propped him upright, ignoring the insistent messages from his body that even if this was wrong it felt so good. "Just let me rest a little while."

"Sure..." he cast about wildly, finally turning to the bed and walking Remus slowly across the floor, their footsteps stirring up dust.

"And there's something else here," Remus said, when Sirius had set him on the bed. He tilted his head back, exposing a sharp jaw and strong neck. "Do you feel that?"

Sirius, more concerned with his friend's health, shook his head. "Feel what?"

Remus smiled, and let himself fall back on the bed, legs dangling over the edge. Sirius swallowed, and leaned over him.

"Talk to me, Moony," he said worriedly.

One of Remus' hands tangled in his slick black hair, and he gasped as fingers ghosted across his scalp.

"This was his room," he said, pulling Sirius down close, so that their eyes were even with each other. Sirius felt his thighs press against the edge of the bed, one of them between Remus' legs so that Remus' own thigh was rubbing a very sensitive spot.

"This was their room," Remus said, and kissed him.

I want to paint you again, Salazar says. I want a body study.

A body study? Godric asks, tilting his head. You haven't done one of those since you worked with my father.

I want to do a self-portrait, Salazar says, because no-one has ever done one before. But I must have complete honesty. I have studied Roman technique, you know that, painting the real – shadows, and body shapes...

He spreads his hands. It has been weeks since the other paintings were done, and even the last trace of pigment is gone from beneath his nails. Godric examines them.

I must study the shape of the human body. My portrait must be honest, the honesty of painful study. I think it will work, he adds. I wouldn't ask otherwise.

Godric looks at his friend's hopeful face. What do you require?

A study of musculature. Arms. Chest. Thighs, Salazar says, blushing a little on the last word. Perhaps one session without your jerkin, one with your short-breeches. Nothing, he says, with a sly smile, that will wreck your dignity.

As if you could, Godric replies loftily.

Seemingly to prove his point, when Godric comes to his studio that evening, he is wearing short-breeches that come just below the knee, and are tight around his thighs. Salazar lifts a delicate, artistic eyebrow as Godric strips off his jerkin, and sits on the brocaded chair in the middle of Salazar's tower studio.

He sleeps and has his snakes and books in the dungeon, but he paints here, in the east tower, where there is light to show the colours true. The wind, also, keeps the fumes from going to his head.

They may anyway, he thinks, as he gazes at Godric, who is sitting a little slouched, waiting for his instruction.

Godric's skin is scarred in places, from his knighthood days, but this only makes the drawing more interesting. He takes a lump of charcoal he has pressed himself, and gestures. Godric imitates the gesture, and Salazar sketches quickly with the charcoal, drawing lines that run thick and thin, fade into nothing or smear where a scar stands out. He changes his gesture, and Godric once again follows.

Salazar presses his hand over the left half of his chest, and Godric imitates it. The fingers on the skin make Salazar catch his breath in ways he tries not to think about. Instead, he clears his throat, and says, Lift your right leg, over your left.

Godric does so. Salazar concentrates on the shape of the muscle; it has been too long since his old Master, Godric's father, set him to doing this sort of drawing. He is shocked when the knee he is drawing twitches.

What is it? Godric asks, when Salazar starts back.

Salazar raises his head. The charcoal drawing moved, that's all, and it surprised me, he said.

You must know me better than you think, Godric answers. This is more true than he knows, but Salazar, an initiate into the magic of the moving, breathing portrait, doesn't say anything.

He stands and circles his subject, and Godric follows him with his eyes. After a moment, he reaches out and lifts one of Godric's arms across his chest, so that his right hand rests on his left shoulder.

Uncross your legs, he orders, and Godric obeys. He places Godric's left hand on his left knee, crouching to arrange the fingers. His breath

puffs on Godric's left thigh, and he realises the muscles are tense.

He looks up at Godric, noticing how his hands have left charcoal marks on the skin. Marked you, I have, he thinks to himself. Godric's left hand twitches slightly. His eyes have darkened.

Salazar looks down, embarrassed at the flush in his cheeks, and realises this -- after putting his hands on his friend, his model -- is his second mistake.

Godric, clearly, is enjoying the attention.

He moans a little and clutches up Godric's left hand to his cheek, and his knees hit the stone floor and Godric's hand lifts his chin. His right hand slides from its place on his shoulder, slowly, drawing the charcoal Salazar left there down his body. He flicks his wrist and the lacings of the breeches fall away.

Salazar wants to draw him, he is so perfect. Legs spread, body slouched a little, breeches open, cock hard...

Salazar sways forward and slides his mouth over the head, tasting, hearing Godric's moan of sudden pleasure. He's waited to hear that, wanted to hear it for years, ever since Godric had his man's growth and Salazar noticed for the first time that the son of his Master was good to look on.

He clutches at Godric's thighs, finding a slow rhythm that suits his friend's lazy groans, the slight buck of his hips. Godric never does anything hurriedly, he thinks, and wonders if he can make him. The hot length feels good in his mouth, throbbing with Godric's pulse, and Salazar's eyes close as he enjoys what can't possibly be real, what must be a dream --

Godric's fingers push him away, and he looks up suddenly, wondering why, was his mouth not good enough, is he not good enough --

The smile on Godric's tanned face belies even the idea as he continues to push until Salazar's back rests on the floor. His legs are splayed, his own cock hard and aching under the lacings. Godric kneels above him, slides a hand over the soft fabric and the hard erection underneath. The pressure nearly drives Salazar mad.

Godric's hips are suddenly on top of him and his lips are suddenly the only heat Salazar needs, tongue flicking roughly so like a cat's against Salazar's own smooth mouth. His hand frees Salazar's cock and brushes across it, and Salazar's eyes roll up in his head as he cries out. Hips buck and legs tangle and Godric's mouth finds his neck, his pulse, which is pounding in his groin so hard he is sure Godric's cock, rubbing against his, must feel it; Godric has matched his rhythm and his hands are too many places at once and all Salazar can do is lie on the floor, arms above his head, and allow this powerful, hungry man to debauch him completely.

Sirius bent into the kiss with such force that for a moment he forgot the bed, the room, the paintings, the grind of Remus' thigh against his groin, and all he knew was the rough friction of another boy's lips on his. Remus' teeth scraped across his tongue, until he realised that he was trying to force it into the other boy's mouth.

And then he tried to stop, and that didn't work either. Moony's hands had him trapped, and his own were no help, spreading across the green-and-gold blanket, propping his weight up.

"It's the room," he gasped, into Moony's mouth, but the other boy rolled and suddenly Sirius found himself flipped off his feet onto the blanket, no more in control of his body than a prisoner, subject to the whim of the brown-haired boy bending over him, straddling his hips.

"This bed isn't a bed," Remus whispered, and Sirius cried out as his lips found Sirius' jaw. "It's a promise."

"Moony," Sirius moaned, writhing underneath the weight of Remus' thighs, first in order to escape and then because damn, that felt good. Remus was hard and pressed against him, and he was right, there was something in this place...

"It doesn't matter," Remus whispered, against the sensitive skin where neck met shoulder. His hands, which had been pinning Sirius, now began to work deftly at his clothing, stripping his shirt off, tugging on his trousers. Sirius turned his head to the side and moaned, feeling as though quite possibly all his birthday wishes had come true at once. Remus' lips were pressed to the warm skin of his chest, his ribcage, belly, his tongue sliding along his navel before nuzzling his trousers gently.

"Here?" Remus asked hoarsely. "Now?"

"Here now please..." Sirius begged, hips bucking upwards, and Remus laughed throatily.

"I can take back what I gave you," he said, nimble fingers tugging Sirius' trousers and underthings off, thumbs stroking the line of his hip. "I think you'll like it..."

Sirius cried out and arched as Remus breathed warm air across his cock, tongue swiping up it in a move that nearly undid him.

"Why..." he gasped, as warmth engulfed him, motion became sense became pleasure became Moony...

Who merely moaned around him and moved his tongue in ways that Sirius didn't know existed. His hands clutched the blanket, his body stiffened and tensed and bucked as he threw his head back, keening. Moony, please, Remus, please...

The silence was so sudden and so immediate that at first he wasn't sure what had happened.

Then he felt that wonderful warmth removed, felt it slide up his body as it relaxed, and tasted himself in Remus' mouth.

Of their own accord, his hands pulled Remus close, one drawing slowly down his chest, and the image of Moony, undressed, flashed too clearly in his mind for him not to make it a reality; he slid his fingers along the rows of buttons, popping them deftly, not stopping when he reached the trousers. Moony moaned into his mouth as he stroked sensitive skin, pressed against his body when he grasped it in his hand. He cried out when Sirius stroked, slowly, almost lazily, until the pressure of his hips became too much.

Sirius grinned and tightened his fingers, and Moony couldn't make a sound as he came, spilling himself against still-hot skin, body wracked with pleasure.

When it is over, after they have caught their breath and Godric has laughed into his neck and Salazar has moaned a cleaning spell, Godric drapes himself across the chair, breeches still undone, a lazy smile on his face. Salazar rises, stretches, and – never really having undressed completely – closes his own, doing the laces with hands which just barely tremble.

He walks to the stand where his drawings were, and his breath catches in his throat when he sees what is there.

The charcoal, he thinks, it was resonating with me.

There on the sheet of thin wood, the one he had intended to do a final portrait of Godric on, there is a deeply detailed charcoal image of himself, smiling slightly. As he watches, the hands move, the eyes shift, the clothing ruffles as if in a slight breeze.

What did you expect? says the portrait, in his voice. Did you think you could know yourself before now?

He glances up at Godric, but Godric does not speak; he merely smiles. Under his dark brows, Salazar smiles back, and sets the portrait aside.

I can never do better, he says to Godric.

Godric is still smiling.

Come to my rooms, he invites. And we will test that idea.

Salazar never draws another self-portrait. He never sees the need to. All he needs to remember of himself is the magically preserved charcoal drawing that hangs in the Great Hall, a strange black-and-white contrast to the glorious colours of the other three.

The Portrait Room did not and does not appear on the Marauder's Map. It was carefully wiped away by a charm from Sirius.

It was, after all, a place of old magic.

A promise.

Their promise.

END