

A SAVIDGE BEGINNING

The first time he met Nox Flesher, Spalding was visiting Nox's father, Alastor, to discuss the family butcher shop.

Spalding had been to the Flesher home many times over the years and he had watched it metastasize from a single-storey farmhouse into a turreted, multi-storey hive of different architectural inspirations. It stood at the end of a long winding lane that was hidden by overgrown hedges and wild willows. Most neighbours thought the property was either abandoned or haunted, and Alastor encouraged these rumours as they helped keep the general population away.

“Savidge,” he said as he came into the sitting room where Spalding waited. “Thank you for coming.”

Spalding tipped his hat. “Of course. Flesher concerns are always my concerns.”

“Good man. Speaking of which, this is my youngest, Nox. He’ll be taking over for me when he’s of age.”

Alastor pushed forward a solemn boy in his early teens. Up to that point, Spalding had heard about the boy, but had never seen him. It was hard to see any resemblance between father and son. Alastor was well into his seventies, but years of swinging cleavers and hauling carcasses had given him a powerful frame. He was a man who towered rather than stood, who strode rather than walked, and who thundered rather than talked.

Nox instead was pale and elegant. His face was fine-boned, and dark hair framed large, limpid eyes. He was, in a word, Byronic: the tragic ideal of a consumptive hero.

But Nox was still a Flesher, and Spalding knew better than to underestimate him.

Nox settled into a chair in the corner as Spalding and Alastor politely inquired after each other’s health, prospects, and family. Spalding, pointedly, did not ask why Alastor was planning to give the thriving Flesher shop to his youngest when he had several other children ready to run it. He had learned long ago not to ask questions where Fleshers were concerned.



“I have some property a few hours south of here that I’d like you to take a look at,” Alastor said. “Clean it up for winter.”

“I always wanted to get into property management,” Spalding said with a smile.

“I’ll get the paperwork.”

Spalding was left alone with Nox. The boy had ignored the adults in the room, content to toy with a metal contraption with too many gears. Now, he climbed off his chair and approached Spalding. He pointed to Spalding as he held out the metal contraption. “*Carnifex*.” It was the only word Nox said the entire evening; his voice was soft and articulate. As soon as Spalding took the contraption, Nox turned and left the room.

Spalding looked at the object more closely. It resembled a wire birdcage, just big enough for the dusky moth it held inside. Delicate pins held its wings open. Spalding turned a crank on the side and the pins moved the wings to mimic flight. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. Then Spalding noticed the moth’s antennae quivering. The insect was still alive.

Spalding looked up to see Alastor standing in the doorway with a glint in his eyes. “That’s why he’s taking over the shop,” he rumbled.

Late that night, when Spalding was home, he took down his old school books and looked up *carnifex*. It was Latin for ‘butcher.’

Spalding wasn't sure Nox was as uninterested as he appeared to be.

Like a wound that only hurt after it was discovered, evidence of Nox appeared to Spalding everywhere in the Flesher house. Here, Nox was peering at him from the darkness of the stairs; there, he was pattering from the room as Spalding entered it. More metal mechanisms littered the house in conspicuous places. Some contained insects; others held toxic plants. Spalding couldn't tell if Nox was trying to impress him or intimidate him. The boy certainly made Spalding's skin prickle in a way that Alastor, for all his unique enterprises, never had.

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